

The Landscape of Desire: A Novel
(creative project)

The Landscape of Desire: Self and the Other in
James Salter's *A Sport and a Pastime* (exegesis)

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Declaration

I certify that, except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of the work, which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged. Ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

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Research Summary

The following thesis is submitted for a PhD in creative writing. The thesis is composed of two parts: a creative project and an exegesis. This summary will detail, in order, the questions with which I approach in both my creative project and exegesis.

The first part of this thesis, my creative project, is a novel titled *The Landscape of Desire*. The novel is loosely based on the 1861 Victorian Exploring Expedition. Now known as the Burke and Wills Expedition, the members of this expedition departed from Melbourne intending to cross the Australian continent from south to north. No such crossing had ever been successful.

At the time they set out from Melbourne, Burke and Wills were members of Australia's best-funded expedition. Despite this, however, the Burke and Wills Expedition proved disastrous. Of the four men who reached the northernmost point of the journey, only one survived. The expedition leader, Robert O'Hara Burke, and his third in command, the surveyor William John Wills, both died before they could reach Melbourne.

In *The Landscape of Desire*, my intentions are to explore the inner lives of Burke and Wills. Through the art of the novel, I want to see whether I can recover Burke and Wills from the history books that relegate their lives to a series of facts and failures.

The *Landscape of Desire* attempts to locate the meeting place of knowledge—all that we know, through books of history and primary sources, about the Burke and Wills Expedition—and the imagination—all we can learn from the art of the novel. The novel tries to uncover the silent spaces of the kind of (historical) story that J.M. Coetzee writes about in his novel *Foe*: “In every story there is a silence, some sight

concealed, some word unspoken, I believe. Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story” (1987, p. 164).

My creative project, therefore, seeks to come to “the heart of the story” (Coetzee 1987, p. 164) of Burke and Wills. One *silent* aspect in the history of the Burke and Wills Expedition has allowed me, as a novelist, to imagine something which has no foundation in the historical record. My creative project imagines that Robert O’Hara Burke’s love, the actress Julia Matthews, was also in love with Burke’s surveyor, William John Wills.

The introduction of this third party creates a triangular love affair in the novel. The French theorist René Girard established, in his book *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961; English trans. 1965), that many of these triangular love affairs fall into a category which he terms *triangular desire*.

Triangular desire, therefore, is the theory that I will examine in this exegesis. *The Landscape of Desire* is, as stated, my creative project. For my case study, I will investigate James Salter’s *A Sport and a Pastime*, a novel which, like *The Landscape of Desire*, includes a triangular love affair.

Using this theory, creative project and case study, this thesis seeks to define and investigate the following questions:

—What is Girard’s theory of *triangular desire*?

—How does Girard define the three characters—whom he labels *subject*, *mediator* and *object*—in his triangle?

—How can we observe Girard’s theory in Salter’s novel?

—Does Salter’s triangular relationship constitute what Girard defines as *triangular desire*?

—Does the relationship among Burke, Wills and Julia in *The Landscape of Desire* constitute what Girard defines as *triangular desire*?

The following thesis defines Girard's theory of *triangular desire* and the three figures—*subject*, *mediator* and *object*—who construct that triangle. Through a close examination of *A Sport and a Pastime*, it establishes that we can observe *triangular desire* in Salter's novel. It also establishes that reading my creative project (*The Landscape of Desire*) and a case study (*A Sport and a Pastime*) through the lens of Girard's theory shows us that the capacities and scope of that theory have not yet been exhausted. While the relationship among the three characters in both my creative project and Salter's novel coincides with the majority of Girard's theory, the forms of *triangular desire* that unfold in *The Landscape of Desire* and *A Sport and a Pastime* present new aspects of that theory. These new aspects, explored in depth in the following exegesis, show us that the full capacities of *triangular desire* have not yet been explored in literary studies, thus leaving future implications for the study of Girard's theory in the art of the novel.

The Landscape of Desire: A Novel

OTHER ITEMS LIE scattered, wreckage across the primal earth. These are the things they fell to their knees to bury.

Four journals bound in leather.

A fish bag.

Three sealed letters, signals of distress, one written by each of them and addressed to the future.

One pocket watch, its face cracked, property of King's father.

A woman's kid glove (white, right hand), folded inside a canvas bag with Burke's reports to the Committee.

A woman's kid glove (white, left hand), hidden in the depths of Wills's microscope box, beneath letters not meant for the Committee's eyes.

HE COMES TO them out of the distant darkness. Out of darkness and into pools of evening light, he moves unsteadily. He is ragged and pale. His clothes hang from his limbs.

Watch.

He is learning to speak with his hands. Like a child, he points to familiar objects — *earth, moon, tree* — and nominates their existence. With extended arms, fingers like limbs in a breeze, he continues as though this ability will save him. Despite his concentration, the objects (for now, *earth, moon, tree*) are mere remnants of their originals. In this language of gesture, his inflections are frenzied, foreign. He knows these shrugs and shifts belong neither to them nor to any of the other tribes he has encountered in the past months. Still, he must continue the training. In this way, he will shed one skin and grow another.

He brings his hands together as though in prayer and presses them to his lips, signalling food where there is no food. His left hand sinks to his side. Above the cracked earth that hand sways, and in his mind he summons water. On he moves to assemble shelter, fire, a blanket to ward off the night chill. Always he saves for his final exercise the articulation of those bodies he turned his back on and which now lie half-exposed beneath the crescent moon, white men who had once been ghosts among the nearby tribe and who haunt him still.

At last, he reaches the clearing. From the other side, beyond a veil of trees, comes a voice, alone in the dark. Soon another joins it, then another, until the chanting begins in full. He steps into the middle of the clearing, his crooked body exposed to the dying light.

He has been here before. He knows the chant. In the past months, there have been times when memories of this procession of vowels have been enough to sustain him.

He likes to think of it as a hymn, sacred and gleaming from some otherwise impenetrable darkness. As he and the others stumbled across the desert, he listened for these voices. Given time, he believed, they would reveal themselves. When that time came, all he would have to do was latch onto the melody, his very own hymn. Voices crying from the dark beyond to usher the broken party into safety.

These beliefs he kept to himself in those weeks they searched for one of the two tribes: the first formed of their own kind and the other, this congregation of one hundred natives for whom he has no name. With this lapse into silence, he marks the first of his betrayals. Could he have spoken such thoughts to those other men, those of his own tribe? Would they have acknowledged him if he had?

For twenty-one days, he has searched along the creek. Always he remained two steps behind, always too late. Yet even in the surrounding quiet he could hear them leading him on, these voices. At last he has found them. He is here now, returned to this place where it all began.

He steps into the veil of trees. A few paces more and he can see the fires. Quickening flames illuminate his hands and arms. Scrub clings to his legs, holds him in place. For a fleeting moment, all is motionless, his pallid body blending into the frail eucalypts. Then a new quivering emerges, women's voices. He turns his ankle, breaks free.

He is here now. Beyond this point all is uncertain.

He is here now. This, for now, is all that matters.

Chapter 1: The Language of Absence and Longing

ALL THROUGH THE journey, he can hear them stirring in the supply car: four carrier pigeons cooing inside their cage. It is midwinter, dusk. They are travelling deeper into the north. The continent opens before them, its layers unfold. On either side, the first assembly of hills draws near, darkening hills, sparsely patched.

Across from him are two men, Aitkin and Vinning. These men he knows from previous journeys. They have learned to read his thoughts as precisely as he directs their actions. In the seat beside him is the new man, a surveyor named Welch.

He has spoken little since they left the city earlier this afternoon, even less since the train departed. One moment, he was standing on the platform, hands in his pockets, mouth fixed in grin. They were five minutes from leaving. He had allowed himself to at last take pleasure in his progress. Ten minutes later, he was sitting in the moving train, unable to speak.

An hour has passed since then. The others have asked nothing about what took place on the platform, not even questions about the stranger's name or (he knows Vinning's interests in the hierarchy of the Committee) position. Perhaps they are waiting for him to provide that information, waiting for him to unfurl the full story in their next briefing, when he, Alfred Howitt, will fasten yet another layer onto the coming unknown.

He examines the unchanging landscape, the greenery that has bled dry. Hills recede like waves into the distance, where they break black against the horizon. Even here, less than an hour outside the city, the land is detached, unwelcoming. He had remembered something else. In his journal he will make a note of this discrepancy. Along with inefficiency, he despises forgetfulness above all else. His first entry, then,

will be composed of his own forgetfulness. He will consign the moment to paper. In this way, he thinks, it will be no different from charting a map.

From his coat pocket, he removes a handkerchief and presses it to the glass, clearing the moisture. He opens the window (metallic thumping fills the carriage, his papers rise, scatter) and clears the grime from the other side, opening the view to all that awaits, his future world entire.

For as long as Aitkin and Vinning have known him, Howitt has been obsessed with horizons. In vast expanses, he sees opportunity. Where others gaze into the stark unknown, professing catastrophe in the white spaces of the map, Howitt sees prospects altogether different. The wider the horizon, the clearer his mind. Two hours in the city, on the other hand — all closed spaces and obstructed views — are enough to give him fits.

After news of his early successes began to reach the public (at first, through articles and photographs, later, with his own series of lectures), it was common for Aitkin and Vinning to hear their leader's name spoken in a stranger's voice as they passed through the city. Before long, they came to expect such interruptions in their daily movements, though neither would admit this vanity.

Aren't you ...?

And so it began, always with a half-formed question. After several interruptions, they learned to accept that this would be followed not by their own names but by his. *Aren't you ...?* Silence as the interlocutor drew closer. *Aren't you Mr Howitt's ...?* The voice fading into reticence. At which point, the man (to their dismay, it was always a man, too elderly to have volunteered for such a journey himself but covetous of the experience all the same) would approach and place a firm grip on one of their arms.

For Aitkin and Vinning, the recognition was easy to make. It was in the eyes. Imagine a criminal spotting a fellow member of his trade from across a crowded room, Aitkin thought. All of the ways certain men will recognise one of their own. There are shared passions, skills that connect us to a particular clan, and this is precisely what they would see in the man's stare as passers-by navigated around them. That was all it would take, a moment's recognition, a passion that had once been lost but which was suddenly recovered.

In the man's stare, Aitkin and Vinning could reach back to their own younger selves. Here they are, a decade before, a lifetime. In another hemisphere, they kneel on the floor of their respective childhood rooms. Beneath each, unfolded with the greatest care, lies a creased map, its edges torn. No matter how many times they were interrupted on the city streets, the years would dissolve, and they would return to those earlier lives and their maps, long since discarded but never forgotten. Rainy afternoons, Aitkin and Vinning kneeling above Africa, South America — much like the man before them had once knelt, perhaps — those unfilled regions that contained the seeds of all their dreams.

In that gaze, their childhood hunger returned. It rushed back each time someone pulled them aside. *Aren't you ...? Tell me ... What kind of a man is this Alfred Howitt?*

And what could they say? That they would do anything for Alfred Howitt? That they would follow him wherever he went? That there is, as far as they are concerned, no finer man in this colony or all the others combined?

It is to these men that Howitt now turns. A moment's eye contact, a quick nod. He gives them just enough room to remain detached before they reach Swan Hill and are forced to throw themselves headlong into the true business of this journey. Amid his occasional glances, they remain silent, composed.

Everything is in order. There is no time to waste.

From across the aisle, the new one, Welch, turns to face him. Alfred Howitt, the man who will lead them into the desert and back again. Of that outcome, Welch is certain. There can be, he thinks, no alternative.

For a man who comprehends the personalities of maps easier than he identifies the emotions of people, Welch has learned to do away with one language so that he may inhabit the complexities of another. In place of words, he settles for the textures of space, all of the intricacies that reveal themselves inside the borders of a page. Thin lines, bold lines. Great white spaces of hunger and hope.

Throughout his life, he has pursued the temperament of hands and handwriting, all of the things that symbols on a page tell us about the person who etched them. Over time, he has learned the art of patient revelation, how to distinguish the qualities that form landscape where there is no landscape.

On the train headed north, as he studies Howitt's slightest movements, Welch perceives receptiveness, kindness in the furrows deepened by the antipodean sun. He has known Howitt for several weeks. He has known of him for much longer. This man who, they say, behaves in public much as he does behind closed doors. The way Howitt addresses each of them without wavering, holding them in place while he speaks, empowering them with confidence and a craving to please.

From his seat, Welch records the changes in Howitt's expressions. With the curiosity of a painter, he notes each twitch of the man's body, his knees and shoulders swaying to the train's rhythm. Already, Welch prepares as though some future interrogation awaits, as though his life depends on deciphering the manner and mystery of his leader's behaviour, all before the train reaches Swan Hill. And he

knows, has acknowledged since he stood before the Committee one week ago and signed his name to the record, that the stakes of this journey are nothing less.

For now, Welch is content to watch them — Howitt, Aitkin and Vinning — from afar. He is content to study, in silence, the subtleties of their gestures and shared familiarities. These men who through misfortune and conquest have learned to anticipate each other's public outbursts and most intimate rituals. Like nuns living in a convent, he thinks, their lives are ordered by forces beyond their control. Soon, he knows, he will want what the three of them share.

Soon, he will need to draw closer to their realm so that he may survive the ensuing days and whatever lies ahead, out there in the unmapped interior.

From the two subcommittees (one to explore the possibility of an overland recovery party, the other to investigate the feasibility of sending a vessel to the north), there could not have been a better outcome. If there were ever a suitable candidate to lead a search party into the heart of the country, then the Committee had found its man in Alfred Howitt. Why, many wondered during the brief deliberations that led to his appointment, had his name not been on the list of applicants to *lead* the Exploring Party? Where had he been when that party set out under such glorious pretension, eleven months before?

In the days that preceded the announcement, there was much talk of his character and triumphs. As a prospector, he had surveyed all the way to Lake Eyre, one thousand miles of unmarked track. He had never lost a man. Best of all, the Committee liked to say, he is a Victorian, and a gentleman. For these reasons alone, no rival colony could lay claim to his success. There had been enough scandal and humiliation already. Now was the chance to mend the damage, the disgrace brought

on by this era of exploit.

Seated in the train bound for the north, Howitt reflects on the headway he has made since his appointment. Two weeks have passed. In that time, the party has organised itself with remarkable speed. To the Committee's astonishment, he and his men are ahead of schedule. Even Howitt could not have predicted such progress.

It is, he knows, because of the men he has kept close to him over the years, Aitkin and Vinning, this new surveyor who has come to him so highly recommended, Welch. He wonders how they will work together now that this new man is among them. How will Welch conduct himself once they pierce the first membrane of desert?

For now, he must leave them alone. He must give them time to open themselves to one another. Let them ease into a bond. Let them trade theories about what lies beyond the last outpost. What they will find. Who will be alive. Who will have been maddened by the desert silence.

He unlatches the compartment door and steps inside. To his right, beneath the single window, are twelve wooden crates. There are three columns, four crates in each. The numbers face outward, codes by which he has ordered his days. The crates contain food, fishing equipment, clothing, nearly all the supplies that will sustain them during the time ahead.

Beside the farthest row of crates sits the cage. Inside the cage, his pigeons. *His* pigeons. That is how he has thought of them since the beginning, when they were brought to him for inspection. *What do I know about pigeons?* Howitt wanted to say. Instead, he approached the task like a physician scrutinising a display of surgical instruments. All the while, he tried to conceal his true feeling: he was a child, nothing more, and the men who claimed authority through clothes and accent had led him into

a small room to select his first pet.

Of all the ideas the public proposed (hot-air balloons, a system of irrigation — its own interest in this search party made clear from the beginning), he alone could claim the pigeons. Though less innovative than the other ideas, the pigeons would become, if needed, a legitimate source of communication nonetheless. At the very least (this thought he has kept to himself), they were identifiable creatures that would provide comfort in the coming exile.

He crouches beside the cage, removes the cover. Even from this proximity, the sounds are faint. What was it that he heard before, then? Had he only imagined the birds' persistent cooing? If so, then why had *that* sound, muffled among all the dissonant cadences of the moving train, taken hold of him above all else?

There were times, in the nights prior to their departure, when the most minor city hum was enough to startle him awake. Unable to sleep, he would walk twelve blocks to unlock the storage room. Once there, he would sort through the supplies, unpacking the items only to reorganise them in a slightly different fashion. He can discern the identity of each item by shape and weight, like a blind man feeling his way through a cupboard. He keeps a running inventory, mental but exact, of what they will carry and how long it will last. And in case his mind fails him (Is that what happens to one in the desert?), he has packed a ledger in which he keeps a written record.

Among these items, there is only one whose contents are unknown.

The train is nearly two hours out of the station, but the porter's call for departure remains with him yet. Having already said his goodbyes to the handful of Committee members who gathered to see the search party off, Howitt approached the train. His

right boot sought purchase on the first step, hand reaching for rail. Then he felt it: the touch, a hand on his right shoulder, and the stranger's voice telling him to step down.

Howitt marks the moment by that awkward touch, followed by his own, mispronounced name. Like the other members of the Committee, the man was dressed in a black suit, tie and hat. Howitt had never seen him before.

Mr Howet, he said. The voice was firm.

Howitt nodded.

The man tilted his head towards a large column that rose from the middle of the platform. Follow me, he said. He placed his hand between Howitt's shoulders and guided him onward. Once there, the man removed the coat that was draped over his arm and hung it from his left shoulder. Suddenly visible was a leather satchel. He raised it for Howitt to inspect.

Inside are official documents, he said. Consider them property of the Committee. You are to carry these documents with you at all times. Once you come into contact with Mr Burke, your orders are to hand the satchel over to him. Do you understand?

Eyes fixed on the worn leather satchel, Howitt nodded.

Everything goes to Mr Burke and to Mr Burke alone. If Mr Burke should not be present when you locate the Exploring Party — if something *unforeseen* has occurred — then you will keep this satchel and its contents secure.

He paused, waited for Howitt to acknowledge these instructions.

These are confidential documents, Mr Howet. Do you understand what I am saying?

The train's shrill whistle prevented Howitt from answering.

No one but Mr Burke is to see these documents, the man shouted, now leaning uncomfortably close to Howitt's left ear. If anything should happen before you come

into contact with Mr Burke, the Committee demands that you burn these documents.

Howitt narrowed his eyes.

Burn everything.

Again, Howitt looked down at the satchel, which he now gripped in his own hands.

Do you understand?

Yes, Howitt said, at once intrigued and annoyed.

The train's whistling resumed, causing Howitt to jerk his head sideways. He was relieved that he would soon be free from this repetition of simple instructions, a childish game of which he wanted no part. To his left, through the swirling blanket of smoke, he could see Vinning motioning for him to hurry. He looked down at the satchel, his latest inheritance as leader of this search party, and set off running towards the train, the man's voice still in his head as he climbed aboard: *No one but Mr Burke is to see this.*

By the time he turned around, the platform was empty.

He covers the pigeon cage and rises to face the crates. To the right, through the single window in the compartment, the first signs of heavy weather brew in the distance. The front rolls across the horizon. Within the quarter-hour, the train will cross its periphery.

He turns from the window and lifts the satchel, loosening the soft leather straps.

Inside are two bundles of letters, each bound by twine. He removes the first bundle.

There are twenty-eight letters in all. One, he thinks, for every week that the party has been out of contact. Each letter bears the Committee's seal. Howitt brings them to

his eyes, one by one, shifting his position to catch the light from the window behind him. A loud noise startles him, and he drops the letters. Falling to his knees, he stuffs the envelopes inside the satchel, bracing himself against the train's rocking.

He turns to face the door and lets out a wary greeting — *Yes?* — but there is no answer. Another greeting and then, once satisfied that he is alone, he retrieves the satchel and removes the second bundle of letters.

Among these letters are no official seals. Howitt finds no trace of the Committee's presence at all. As he shuffles through them, he studies the name on each envelope. The first few are addressed not to Burke but to William John Wills. The script, as far as he can tell, belongs to a single hand. For this reason, he believes they were sent by Wills's father, the doctor in Ballarat who in the past few months has written to the newspapers and appeared before the Committee, declaring his anger and dismay over what he calls his son's unaccountable absence. Both Dr Wills and the Committee have been careful not to use that other word, the one which now comes to Howitt's own tongue, *disappearance*, but which, out of respect for its influence, he has refrained from uttering, even in private. Once spoken, he knows, the word and all it signifies will be irrevocable.

As he reties the twine around the envelopes, Howitt thinks that it is logical for the Committee to want to keep Dr Wills's letters a secret. The man has incited enough public hysteria already. Still, he can conjure no explanation for the mystery and (he searches for the word) *performance* earlier at the station.

He returns the second bundle to the satchel and slides it behind the crates. Resigned to return to his men without any further understanding, he proceeds to the door.

This is when he sees it: in the sudden flash of lightning, a shard of white. There,

behind the third column of crates, it grows distinct, for an instant frozen. Then darkness. Several seconds pass before another flash of lightning reveals the whiteness once again. He lowers himself, thrusts his hand deeper into the crevice until his fingers secure the envelopes.

There are two letters. He does not remember seeing them before, these letters which must have fallen when he thought he heard someone coming through the door. The first difference between these letters and the others comes in the size of handwriting. Whereas the previous names had been written in a tiny, exact hand, this writing loops and curls, threatening to leap from the envelopes' borders. Other than the addressee's full name — Mr Robert O'Hara Burke, on the first, Mr William John Wills, on the second — there are no other marks.

He turns the envelopes over. On the back of each, he finds an oversized initial, C. Then the scent, strange yet somehow familiar. He extends his hand, shakes both envelopes in the small space between crates and wall, as though eliminating beads of water from the brim of a hat. The fragrance strengthens. It is the scent of Sunday afternoons, walking in the Botanic Gardens, a simple pleasure that he upheld even in the hectic weeks leading to his departure. He remembers the women who strolled past each week while he progressed unceremoniously along the path, pretending to make mental notes of the Latin names of trees. Though he would never cross certain boundaries (not allowing himself to ponder, for fear of what it might initiate, the rise of cheekbone), he learned, during these walks, to catalogue certain strollers by their scent.

These scents he now carries with him. They are bottled in his memory, filed by the time of day or bend in the track where he knew his path would cross their own. Could they have arranged the patterns of their walks to harmonise with his own? Howitt

wonders. Unsettling thoughts for a man in his position, he knows, a man perched at the desert's edge, preparing himself to plunge deeper into it.

The next thoughts, when they finally come, prove more troublesome. The scent will permeate his clothes. His men will smell perfume on his coat, his face and hands. If keeping the letters a secret is one task, concealing this scent will be another matter. Yet he cannot resist.

He places the envelopes under his nose, closes his eyes, inhales. He admires the action, a flirtatious twist that deepens the gesture itself — the letters in his hands, this language of absence and longing. If a daub of perfume employed to heighten whatever communiqué lies within has the ability to unsettle him, what memories will it unleash in men who have been wandering across the desert for eleven months?

Not wanting to risk personal attachment, he has managed, over the past months and especially in the days after the Committee appointed him to lead this search party, to keep Burke's private life at a distance. Only now does he realise what little he knows about the other men, this William John Wills, for instance, a name he recognises only as the expedition's third-in-command and the son of the doctor whose accusations of negligence have shamed the Committee.

If selected, Howitt told himself, he would do no less than lead this party with a clinical eye. He has been able to keep that pact, until now. He has remained detached from Burke's life, allowing the man's name to appear as nothing more than a list of details, headlines from newspaper articles that lie neatly stacked in the ordered rooms of his life. *Robert O'Hara Burke to Lead Victorian Exploring Expedition. Burke Reaches the Centre. Burke Unheard From, Presumed Lost.* He has kept these articles in piles so that he can one day add another story, his own, the one that he has already set in motion: *Alfred Howitt Rescues Exploring Expedition. Howitt Returns Burke*

Safely to Melbourne.

He replaces the two letters in the satchel, but it is too late. The apparition has crossed the threshold. It has risen from some bottle to permeate the envelope, his palms and mind. At this moment, he imagines, this very scent drifts through some city street tinged in evening light. Inside a small, warm room, it competes with the clatter of teacups and gossip, freshly baked scones whose aroma cannot contest what wafts from her (already he can picture her, this C.) freckled neckline.

He will follow the scent. He will trace it back to its bottled origin, a dimly lit room, curtains drawn, small bottle resting on oak table. There she sits, back perfectly straight. She plucks the bottle from the table, her delicate hands curling around it as they would a piece of fruit she has learned to appraise without bruising. Into the hollow of her neck, she paints the fragrance. All of this, Howitt watches from that room, seated beside her. Seated on a supply crate, staring into the coming storm, on a train bound for the edge of nowhere with instructions to penetrate into deeper nothingness.

Where will she lead him from here?

He knows that he must put an end to these thoughts. He tries to convince himself that he holds nothing more than letters from Burke's sister, perhaps Wills's mother. The first woman he has read about in the newspapers and who has demanded the safe return of her beloved brother. But no. A sister, a mother, would never provide hints of feast in a time of famine. Besides, the sender of each letter is the same: C. This could be nothing other than what he first assumed. Nothing more than what he secretly hoped when the flash of lightning revealed the bone-white paper.

Inside the supply car, the pigeons stirring beside him, Howitt navigates through the facts. Until now, he had believed that he knew them well. All along, there have

been loose threads. Given time, he would connect them. Among all the variations, through all of the meanderings that he has followed thus far, he has never considered that he would discover this strand. No matter how hard he tried, though, he could not truly claim to have closed himself off to that other level of this story, the one where gossip flows from door to door, spreading like plague.

There are stories about the expedition that, when they first appeared, he learned by rote. Later, before his own departure, he reviewed those stories incessantly. Read through the articles and minutes that contained the history of Burke's party. He considered this an essential element of his preparation. All along, he has known what he must do. All along, he has known that even an apocryphal detail could, if turned to the light, contain a kernel of truth.

Among the fragments that he has collected from Burke's life, he can recall no reference to a companion (he hesitates), a lover. There were rumours of women in the past, of course, but if something has been kept secret (he thinks of the man approaching him at the station: *No one else is to see this*), then why? And what of this William John Wills?

Howitt thinks of the silent spaces of these men's lives, this story. Of all that has remained invisible, despite the relics relayed in shops and pubs, making their way from street corner to street corner, details that enter the fabric of daily life like common myth.

He knows the story. In his memory, it lies scattered somewhere out there, beyond all that is tangible. He has been appointed to collect the pieces. Once reassembled, everything will return to order. He will make it so.

He has heard the chatter. Empty chatter that has filled his days as much as it has anyone else's. He knows the story. Now he knows that he must unearth the truth, all

of the things they left behind.

Chapter 2: In Pursuit of a Rumour

AFTER THE FIRST night, he arrives early and sits in the front row, stage left. From here, he will watch as she waits in silence (Act III, Scene IV) and pulls aimlessly at the faded strip of pink tulle she has carried since her first appearance. She is, he thinks, an astonishing figure, pale and determined. Her delicate mouth threatens permanent brood.

Already, he has mastered the intricacies of her character. He knows her manner and mission on this stage, down to the most precise details. The moment, for instance, she will bend at the waist, blonde hair cascading between left elbow and a definition of breast this childish costume cannot conceal.

There is, first of all, the beginning to think about, her arrival. Several minutes of Act I will pass before she makes her entrance. Her first action? Descending the staircase on tiptoe, she will run her forefinger along the lower rim of thin banister that leads offstage, checking for dust. Then a single word, *Yes*, the answer to another's call from this woman or child (he is still uncertain which) whose arrival has ruptured his seamless days. Even in this moment, when her character's age is only half of what it will be by play's end, there will flood an implicit desire among the men in the audience. At this sudden awareness of the evening's potential, guilt will furrow through the lines of their foreheads as they sink deeper into their seats and lean away from suspecting wives.

He skips ahead, turns the memory forward. He moves through the night, last night, until he reaches the end of the performance. In those final moments (Act III, Scene IV) before the curtain closes, she remains seated, posture perfect in weathered rocking

chair, grey from neglect and a stabbing sun, light whose intensity continues to surprise the members of this audience. Slowly, she lifts her gaze from the fabric on her lap, its corners frayed by worrying hands. Then, facing the audience, she offers an arc of brow, appealing either for help or forgiveness from the anonymous figures seated before her in this town whose name she has yet to learn. Just another stop on an ongoing tour, as her mother has so often told her, and it is on those terms that she, too, has come to think of it.

Through the dénouement, she will sit quietly, feigning indifference at the implications of her behaviour, while from across the stage, the world of her father and mother which she has long since spurned, begins the final quarrelling about her recent behaviour and its required punishment. To him and the other men in the audience, it will seem callous, an absurd reaction from overprotective parents.

To the women, on the other hand, the child (she is no mere child, they know better) deserves a sentence more severe than these bumbling parents — merely actors, after all — are willing to bestow.

If ever I caught mine.

She'd have had more coming to her than that.

Such thoughts.

And for a girl her age!

Some are born with the demon in them, I tell you.

Fragments of conversation linger from the previous night. They drift through the empty theatre, settling like mosaic.

Robert O'Hara Burke — Police Inspector of Beechworth, Victoria — is thirty-four years old. He has reached the point in life when there is no return.

Long after that first performance ended, when it became obvious that the inspector was not likely to leave of his own accord, the two boys whose job was to straighten the seats and tidy the empty theatre ushered him to the door.

This way, sir.

It's a beautiful night out.

They proceeded to the entrance, each pressing a palm into Burke's back and, indicating the few theatregoers who chatted in the cool damp, helped him on his way. There he stood, uncharacteristically awkward. He was uncertain about which steps to take after her advent, so unlikely, and in such an improbable place. More important at this very moment: how would he find his way home in the sightless dark?

Looking pale, Burke, said the shopkeeper Smithyson as he passed with wife and daughter on either arm. The women eyed the inspector. Pale, perhaps, they might have agreed, but striking nevertheless.

Now, on the occasion of her second performance, he waits in his seat in the front row, this calculated position that he settled on during the sleepless night, believing it would offer the best vantage of her when, in that final scene, she will appear unashamed of her prior deeds and present beauty. He has convinced himself (How? Somehow) that she will notice him. Notice him *in her time of need*, as he has come to think of it. But this thought soon passes, for in truth he knows that such complex and unyielding eyes as hers, this Julia Matthews, cannot be predicted.

Several moments pass before Burke realises that he is alone in the theatre, the first

to arrive. He had not meant for this to happen. Without warning, he releases a guttural sound from his mid-region. All day, he has been anxious that his blatant pleasure at first seeing her was obvious to all who sat near. He could not judge, for instance, whether the McGovern sisters had turned during the finale to look at him when that awful sound (Was it an oath of devotion?) escaped his long body. Trying to gain a better view of her, he had, by then, leaned so close to the row in front that his head was nearly perched on the merged shoulders of the town's latest newlyweds.

It will not happen again. Tonight, the front row is his. He is the only person in Beechworth, he is certain, who would return on the second night of a performance after having been present at its premiere. Are his actions too obvious? After all, he is a bachelor. He knows the rumours. He has heard of the ways the town gossips chat about him. *What could possibly be wrong?* they want to know. *A man of his age, handsome and charming, and still unmarried.*

For these enquiries, he has prepared a statement. If necessary, he will press it to their ears, gentle as a kiss.

Again and again, I find that the theatre propels me. Something about it makes me feel, well, *exuberant*. Even here.

This last part he plans to add, eyes raised, as he surveys the surrounds of Beechworth. Or, at least (this he will keep to himself), the *exuberance* such a woman provides him. This actress, who is less than half his age.

Burke steps outside and walks the length of the building until he reaches the back door. In front of the darkened window, he stares at his reflection. With the palm of his hand, he smooths his black hair. Throughout the day, its three waves of curl have refused to settle against his scalp. Even so, he persists in his attempt to direct them into a second layer of skin.

From one of the side streets, he hears the reverberation of footsteps, a short burst of laughter. The voices coax him out of the darkness.

Two women approach. They walk arm in arm. Trailing awkwardly behind are men he recognises as their husbands. They have come from a party, he thinks. For this evening, they have prepared as one would in London. Or at least this is how they imagine one in London would have prepared for such a night. That, after all, is most important: to plant the first seeds of tradition, to disguise any trace of new growth as lifelong ritual.

Odd that after two years in this town he cannot assign names to their faces. He ascribes this lack of recognition to the women's present light-heartedness, their unsullied clothing. The men who wear collars buttoned around strong necks, newly shaved and pink. Dressing them in their daily garb, he can imagine *that one* leaning against a fence, hammer in hand. And *she* must be the woman who came to the station last month not to make a complaint, as he had expected, but to offer something or other that she had baked *Epecially for you, Inspector*.

He believes it is his duty to keep at close hand the names and faces, all of the private hopes and dreams these people share with him over tea and during weekend battles of sport. Or in front of his small desk when, a day or two after his most recent feat on the playing field, they sit as though before a stranger and demand that he correct this or that injustice committed against them.

This, he knows, is not what they are here for, not tonight. Tonight there will be no grumblings. For the women, this is a glimpse into a life their mothers have told them about. Their husbands, on the other hand, have come out of duty. Such an occasion, they have been informed, brings its own demands, and they are not to discuss that which can wait until daylight. Besides, Burke thinks, he is not working. Even though

he wears his uniform and, sins of omission aside, has come to think of his responsibilities as similar to those of a country priest.

He steps out of the shadows, quickens his pace in order to meet them at the entrance. Laughter in the dark. His name carried across the street by women's whispering. He turns to face them, bowing at his thickening waist. The practised tilt of hat, devilish narrowing of pallid eyes.

Good evening, he says.

For the simple reason that no one else in Beechworth would utter such a commonplace phrase so completely, he draws the words out, stretches them into the night. It is only one of the many marks that keeps him distinct, he thinks, as he gazes at each woman in fond recognition. Why can't he remember their names?

Fractured light leaks through the open door. In that brief moment, the women allow their eyes to linger on his left profile.

For some time, the scar has been the topic of teatime conversation, though theories of its origin and descriptions of its contours continue to differ. *It meanders along the terrain of his left cheek, a river flowing through thick forest of beard.* One of these very women offered this sketch not long after Burke arrived among them. Her voice was soft, elsewhere.

The other nodded, continuing where her friend left off. It prepares to empty into a delta of soft upper lip before ...

Before disappearing into an arc of moustache.

They could not help giggling, but there it was.

After these declarations, they decided that something stronger than tea would be

necessary if they were to discuss him properly.

Throughout the afternoon and into the evening, they moved from head to toe, assembling him whole. Robert O'Hara Burke, lately of the Austrian Army, the Dublin Constabulary, now here among them in little old Beechworth. One would call out an attribute or feature — Eyes? — which the other then classified: Pale as a cloudless day.

Swagger?

Deceptive.

On they continued under the influence of whiskey until they grew more daring, each raising her teacup whether in agreement with her friend's depiction or not.

Then, their own reflections staring back at them inside the window frame, they knew it was time. If they could not undress him under these circumstances, the opportunity might never arise again.

And beneath the uniform? one dared ask.

Silence.

How to describe what lies beneath? It came again, the teacups were refilled.

The body, she (which one?) said, of an athlete.

That was as far as they could go, that was as far as they could take it. Despite the laughter, despite the alcohol's enhancements of their imagery. Once pronounced, the form they gave him, a body that, called forth for examination and constructed limb by limb, was sharp enough to wound. Their husbands would return within the hour. Not bothering to glance into their eyes, each man would sit at his table in expectation of dinner. But these women had already seen Burke on the playing field. They had noted the pulse of muscle in his legs and arms, his neck. No husband, however great his fury over charred meat, could take that away.

As they step into the makeshift theatre, these women allow their bodies to press against his, their inspector's. And Burke? How does he react to the fragrance of their passing forms? For a moment, he forgets about Julia Matthews, forgets about his reason for returning here tonight. When the women pass, he leans in at the last possible moment, hip brushing hip. He wants to feel the warmth of this passing body. Whose body, it does not matter. Th is Irishman and his flexible loyalties, sent to instil order upon those who in the waning gold rush have discovered alternative ways to soothe their appetites.

The truth is that he wasn't the first to hear of her arrival. Later, for this very reason, Burke liked to think that she came to him by chance.

Here, in the outer district of the colony, much of the land still indecipherable to him, he has learned to glide unnoticed across the sparse architecture of days. In a land that leaves no opportunity for secrets, everything, he thinks, falls to chance. Lives bask in the open. There is little room to hide. Secrets, dispersed like seed, grow under the community's watchful gaze.

After two years among them, Burke now uses this knowledge to his advantage, believing it is nothing more than the natural tendency for a town of spectators to always lie in wait for the latest gossip. The last to hear news such as this, the arrival of a travelling theatre company, could later, polishing the report along the routine stops about town, convince himself that he had been the first to learn what was by now old hat.

The month before she arrived, Burke disappeared in pursuit of a rumour.

James McNulty was the first to complain. Early one morning, he sat across from the inspector, shouting his story of the six or seven men who came to rob him in the

night.

They would have taken what they pleased, McNulty said.

Would have taken, you say? Didn't they get off with anything?

McNulty slumped in the chair and crossed his arms. No, he said. It came out as a disappointment.

I thought you said —

It makes no difference. They came once and they'll come again. You can be sure of that. Only next time, I won't be so lucky.

Oh, Burke said. What was lucky about this time?

McNulty lowered his voice and leaned his weight against the desk. My wife's snoring woke me, see. That's when I heard them, the rustlers. I had time to reach for my pistol. I got a few shots off. Nearly killed one of them. That's how I know they'll be back.

How's that?

They like a challenge, the bastards.

At this detail, Burke nodded.

Here are the facts, McNulty continued. We can't be letting these people come and do as they please. If we don't act now, then before we know it we'll have an epidemic on our hands. An epidemic, I say.

Burke nodded. Yes, he said. An *epidemic*. Wanting to try the word out for himself, he let it roll from his tongue like professional jargon in which he lately had been initiated.

That's right, McNulty said, believing Burke had at last acknowledged the seriousness of the matter. Now, what are you going to do, and when are you going to do it?

For the rest of the meeting, Burke made promises to look into things. Personally, he said. As a contract, he offered his handshake and a sympathetic expression that, to McNulty, confirmed complete acquiescence.

McNulty's grievance was soon followed by another. Two neighbouring farmers arrived at the station the next week, anger and entitlement in their stances. Their stories were similar, save for the snoring wife. Neither man had lost property, though each claimed to have been woken in the night by what they were certain was — what could be nothing but, they reiterated — the sound of cattle rustlers.

I see, Burke said. He opened a ledger in which he stored complaints and sketches of complainers. The ledger resting on his lap and out of their view, he began to draw.

These rustlers came in the night, you say?

Yes.

How many did you say you saw?

See? Each man looked sideways at the other.

Yes. Round the figure off if you must.

Well, we didn't *see* any of them.

You didn't *see* any of them?

It was quite dark, Inspector.

Of course, Burke said, pretending to take detailed notes. Quite dark.

That's right.

Then how can you be certain of what you heard?

This time they were unable to respond.

How can we be sure, Burke continued, that there were men on your property, much less that they came with the intention to steal from you? Cattle rustlers, as you

say. Burke said it as an afterthought. He struggled to keep the smirk off his face, but at this description the two men nearly jumped from their seats.

Yes, that's what they were. Cattle rustlers. It was as though they had identified the thieves in Burke's office.

Tell me, then, Burke said, pencil pressed firmly against a fresh page in the ledger. What exactly did they sound like, these rustlers?

He ignored the grievances for another week. Then, on a Wednesday afternoon, he took two bundles of paperwork from the station, telling his men that he needed a quiet place to work. If they should need him, he would be at home. When they began to laugh, Burke shrugged his shoulders and nudged the door open with his boot.

On Monday morning, McNulty returned to the station to check Burke's progress. When he failed to find Burke at his desk, he went to Smithyson's to buy supplies. Placing a handful of items on the counter, McNulty asked whether the shopkeeper had seen the inspector around.

Why, yes, he said. It just so happens that he stopped by earlier this morning. Said he was looking for a hammer.

A hammer, you say?

Smithyson nodded. Said he'd been meaning to do some fixing up around his place.

Around his place?

That's what he said. Said it was time he moved in properly.

Moved in *properly*?

Yes, that's right. Now let's see. Smithyson started to offer other details about Burke's visit, but before he had a chance, McNulty slammed the front door, leaving his items on the counter.

He peered in at each pub and shop along the main street. Once inside, he called

Burke a useless liar and then some. Men turned heads, looked to see who could be making such accusations so early in the morning, and then went about their business. McNulty then set off for Burke's cabin.

The day was windless, the land lifeless beneath his horse. By the time he reached the bluff overlooking Burke's cabin, much of his anger had settled and was replaced by a shortness of breath that forced him to stop. He surveyed the surrounding area, focusing on the wooden structure in the valley below. It stood small and decrepit, much more shack than home. Other than Burke's spotted horse, the cabin appeared to be abandoned. If McNulty hadn't gone there with his wife two years before to welcome Burke's arrival, he would have no reason to think that anyone lived there at all. Catching his breath, he descended into the valley.

McNulty began shouting Burke's name before he came to a halt. After an awkward dismount, he stepped onto the porch, brogue voice booming between the shock of fist meeting door. He knocked several more times before surrendering in exhaustion. He then walked to the back of the house. Once there, he pressed his face to the window, hands flush against the glass.

Inside, Burke's bachelor life was on full display: clothes and cases strewn about the floor, empty bottles and dirty dishes spread across the table. For a moment, McNulty felt a wave of jealousy. He almost admired the fragrance of this lifestyle, this man who could inhabit such an untidy existence.

That was when he heard the faint sound. It came from behind, a series of bubbles, slow at first. The sound faded into a gurgling giggle, then nothing.

Burke? McNulty mumbled. He leaned away from the window and moved closer to the noise. Where the hell are you, Burke?

He saw Burke's hat and boots resting at the base of a broad eucalypt. Beside these

articles were piles of other clothes. Then, farther along, directly behind the tree, he could see it: the foot of a rusty bathtub.

From that tub emerged, first, nose, followed by a forehead painfully pink beneath the midday sun. Slowly, delicately, his lips ascended from the water. Out they came, lips awaiting contact with other lips, and in the moment the kiss would have taken place, the bather released a trickle of water into the air before slipping once again beneath the sepia-tinted surface.

McNulty stood at the foot of the tub, unwilling — unable — to move at the sight of the naked man below.

To Burke, eyes closed and ears under several inches of water, McNulty's shouts came in muffled waves. *Berg! Berg!* Nothing more than the drivel of one of those native birds whose name he could not (on the rare occasion when he happened to think of it at all) ever get straight. After several tries, McNulty grabbed the edge of the tub and gave it a hard push. Ripples raced across the surface, spilling from the low side. The motion startled Burke from this daily distraction — not quite an afternoon bath but a cooling off, he liked to think — which, lately, had begun to occupy more and more of his time.

He bolted upright out of the water.

Damn it, Burke, have you gone mad? McNulty asked, backing away.

Burke thrust his head sideways. Several seconds passed before he located McNulty.

Why didn't you call out, man? His arms flailed about, slapping against the water like a child denied.

Call out? I've been calling for you all along. There, McNulty pointed. Here.

Well, I didn't hear you. You should have called louder.

McNulty put his hands on his hips to steady their trembling.

Maybe you should be doing your job instead of bathing, he said. It's not even lunchtime, Burke.

Now, don't go and get personal. All I'm saying is you shouldn't've come up surprising me. What with a man who carries a gun. I could have shot you in the confusion.

McNulty turned from the inspector.

What? What is it that you want here?

Don't you sit there all wet and sunburnt and tell me that you're surprised to see me.

No.

That's right.

Well, then.

At that, Burke stepped from the tub. He grabbed his hat, which he placed on his head, giving it a firm pull. Leaving his clothes beside the tree, he began walking to the cabin.

McNulty stood behind him, open-mouthed.

Burke turned to see why he wasn't following. What is it now? he asked.

Good God, man. Pull yourself together.

Three days later, he set out with two of his men. Had it been a month before, he would have come up with another reason for delay, telling McNulty that he wouldn't risk riding out in the heat in search of such vague suspicion. Now, autumnal winds blew in from the south. He credited the change in weather with his willingness to look into the matter. In truth, though, it was time that he got away.

Before all this talk about rustlers, Burke had begun to realise that he was only a few short steps from finding comfort in this life. There was his small cabin on the outskirts of town, the disordered ease of his days. Other than the recent profusion of complaints, he could think of little that troubled him.

That thought alone began to trouble him most.

He always told himself that his post in Beechworth was temporary. In time, he would earn keys to unlock doors of greater influence. For everything but the occasional visits from the local magistrate — each a disaster he remembers only by his awkwardly dramatic search for reports he failed to keep in the first place — he learned to avoid the details of his job while continuing to look for other opportunities.

Long before all of this talk about rustlers, he had imagined cool nights in the bush. If it wasn't the bush itself that called him, then something else certainly was. After four years on the continent, its presence — out there, but always in the shallows of his mind — had begun to obsess him. There was no escaping it. Thoughts of whatever lay beyond — endless desert or inland sea — gave him separation from his daily life. In turn, that separation provided access to the cravings that for years he had tried to keep at bay. Only out there, he sometimes told himself, beyond the gates of the familiar, would he learn to see things for what they truly were.

They rode for five days, three figures silhouetted against the primeval landscape. Westward they travelled through the deafening quiet of rolling earth soaked in extreme light. At the advance of afternoon heat, they stopped to sleep, waking promptly after an hour in the shade of horse and gear. This discipline, one of the few remnants of his life in the military.

Through the day, they pressed on, marking the passage of time by the variations of heat. Side by side, they rode in trancelike silence until darkness slid around them like

a glove. These were nights beside pyramidal fires. Nights of a waxing moon, skies of faultless clarity. The hours stretched before them, empty and merciful. Night sounds, indistinct and nearly human, lay beyond the camp's light as though dredged from a strange book of legends. During these nights, Burke would unpack from his saddlebag a charred stick the length of his leg and stoke the fire, its sputter and dance luring him into memories of his childhood in Ireland. Memories of endless nights, hours of storytelling and laughter. A childhood of privilege and play.

With the back of his free hand, he traced his scar, wondering how he ever came to this place of southern light and colossal skies. Only one thing was certain. Whatever life he once lived was slipping away.

There, seated before the fire, he knew that he could no longer deny it: he was wedged into something that, soon, he would not be able to escape. These routine years. This flicker before the Committee made its announcement and placed his name, like so many childhood sweets, on tongues across the continent.

Chapter 3: Quarantine

HE CANNOT REMEMBER when he last saw the bodies. There had been the

decision to abandon them. That much is certain. He recalls the gathering of branches and leaves. Over each man, he lay a shroud to conceal them, for now, and guard their final passage. He wanted to save them, the others. From what? From all that he knows and has yet to learn. From all that he has seen and cannot describe. This is what he tells himself as the first natives reach the clearing.

The collection of branches and leaves, his tearful waking of the dead. That was in the beginning. About that other body, the first death that drove them from the Gulf, he recalls little. Gray's voice beckoning him in the night. One man's curses, another's surrender. They tied Gray to the camel, securing his defeated form in place. With Gray facing north, they headed south, each of them lost inside the memory of water.

They drift by, these moments. Somewhere beneath his eyelids, they appear, alter, vanish. He remembers. He is shackled to that memory as the current threatens to pull him from a life that no longer belongs to him. He does not know how much longer he will be able to hold this story in one place.

Whether he abandoned the bodies yesterday or earlier today, for instance, he does not know. The desert has played its tricks on him. There are times, lately, when he has begun to recite his own name in order to keep the life that it signifies from fluttering away, two syllables, the last of which they would use to address him: John King. The name will be a means to reclaim himself. When the time comes. If he proves luckier than Gray and the others, those two men whose names he has not yet uttered but whose absence terrifies him nonetheless.

There are shards to this story that he must preserve, truths that he must not forget. He knows that he must collect these memories. One by one, they gather around his battered feet, washed inland from the Gulf. With each passing wave, they dull, his grip on the past slackens. In this way, the story — this story that he has been left to

gather in his arms, the last of them — rushes in and out with the tide. Details resurface, their outlines transposed, as though reflected in a mirror. All he can do now is assemble what accrues. As long as he holds on to the pieces, he thinks, the story will remain his, their own. He must prepare himself for the time when he will lay the story out like kindling and set fire to all that he has seen, all that he knows. *Look*, he prepares himself to say, one day, in some indistinct tomorrow, *see what we have done*.

He is here at last, alone now. Those not taken by death have fled from the base camp on the creek. The abandoned camp that once stood half an hour from where he now waits, watching as the natives congregate before him. He lifts his hands, and they step closer, moving farther from the flames. Four men rising, he thinks, from tongues of fire.

THERE IS STILL the matter of horses.

In Bendigo, Howitt and his men disembark and sit quietly over dinner before retiring for the night. At dawn, they board the coach that takes them to Swan Hill.

Though aware of the glances that greet their arrival, they tell no one who they are, what they have come to do. Among them looms an unspoken fear of announcing their mission to anyone along the way. With this uneasiness comes a single goal: to slip unnoticed into the towns on the fringe of the colony and gather the last items they need to carry into the desert. Except for the horses and their new supplies, it should be as though they never passed through here at all.

Whether that wish stems from his own guidance, Howitt is uncertain. Apart from him, the three others can think of no one else they would rather follow into this country. Still, the thought of passing their fears across the table like bread or salt does not sit well with them.

Two men greet them shortly after they arrive. They are all smiles and belly as they approach Aitkin and offer their assistance. More benefactors, Howitt thinks, as Aitkin redirects the embarrassed men's attention to the party's leader.

They direct Howitt and the others to a stable.

These are good horses, the first man says. Strong horses, indeed.

Yes, says the other, the one who mistook Aitkin for the leader and has since been unable to look directly into Howitt's eyes. Take what you need.

After breakfast the next morning, they are ready to ride on. The quiet man approaches and rests his hand on Howitt's coat sleeve.

I need to talk to you, he says.

Yes? Howitt asks. What is it?

He stares wide-eyed into Howitt's chest. I would like ... he begins, but his voice falters.

What are you trying to tell me? Howitt asks.

I ... Again, he cannot find the words. Perhaps there are no words, Howitt thinks,

only the anxiety that comes with this man's financial attachment to these proceedings. Howitt places his hand on the man's shoulder, offering a sense of understanding, though still unsure of what he is meant to understand.

My men are waiting, Howitt says. If there is something that you need to tell me, please do so now. Otherwise —

I need ...

Howitt raises his eyebrows. Yes? Please speak up. There isn't much time.

Nothing comes. Howitt turns his back to the man and tells the others to wait for him at the edge of town.

We must be going, Howitt says, once again thanking the men for their assistance.

Don't thank me, the first man says. Just find them. Find them and fix whatever went wrong.

Howitt then turns to the other one, whose eyes are lowered to the ground, hands hanging by his side. He mounts his horse and sets off to join his men, thinking as he rides, *These are the last of them, the final ring of men with ties to the Committee.* Beyond this point, he will be in complete control. There will be no more outlandish meetings, no more secret satchels, no more men with obscure hopes of power, men convinced that Howitt's success will trickle down to them. Beyond this point, everything is in his hands. Beyond this point, there is no turning back.

The next day, they reach the Loddon River. They hug its sandy banks, this winding tract of tender earth. They are four figures on horseback, sliding across the motionless landscape.

The night before, after they finished loading their provisions, Howitt called the others into his room. They sat around a small table, the map spread before them, and

reviewed Charles Sturt's route from sixteen years earlier. Howitt reminded them that it lay west of the trail that Burke had most likely taken, and they nodded, mindful that this repetition of fact was ceremonial to their briefings. To Howitt, the information was essential, the very fact of Sturt's failed journey and successive return to Adelaide enough to show him that the desert is more than succubus.

We need to put ourselves in his position, Howitt said. He placed his index finger on the map, tracing their path out of the city and into Swan Hill. No great feat is required to reach this point. After Menindee (he drummed his finger into the map to emphasise his point), everything changes. What, then? he asked. What would Burke have done afterwards?

The four of them huddled around the small table. If Howitt had looked up at that moment, he would have seen them awaiting his decision. Instead, he concentrated on the map, as though his focus might draw some answer from its varied lines and unfilled spaces, the middle territory white and vacant, too immense to be authentic for any man who had not gone forth to observe the void with his own eyes. As he has. As he was preparing himself for once again.

He continued. We have to remember that the Committee gave Burke free rein. Whatever he decided, it is most likely that in desperate times he would have headed for Cooper's Creek. He traced a small circle around that region.

Especially if there were trouble, Vinning said. If they were caught inside a drought. He placed his finger inside Howitt's circle. The Cooper would be the obvious choice.

Howitt nodded. Of course, he wanted to say. Of course, he would have gone for water. Instead, he answered: Even if this wasn't Burke's first choice, he would eventually head for it. With the back of his pencil, Howitt drew a course from the

south-eastern part of the map to a section slightly below the middle, now marking an X into the lower heart of the continent.

Here, he said. He left the mark, his single word, for them to ponder.

Eleven months had passed since Burke's departure, and the Committee could account for nothing more than half the distance of the party's journey. That night, after the other men left him to sit alone with his maps, Howitt thought of Sturt. The man whom the desert quarantined in one place for six months. How long would it take before you began to pray for rain? he wondered. Does one dance beneath the white sky, arms extended heavenward? Or does the dancing begin after the time of prayers yields dark clouds, the courtship of thunder and lightning?

Sturt and his men suffered through six months of drought in the unforgiving desert, their bodies in abeyance. Snared in that blankness, unable to advance or retreat. The red earth seizing his party. The continent asleep and waiting beneath Sturt's threadbare clothes and battered boots.

Only to then get away. Only to then be released, Howitt reminded himself. No matter how bad things looked, he thought — alone in his room in Swan Hill, staring at the map as though it provided the answer to his own future — he must never forget those who escaped the desert's embrace.

Later that night, unable to sleep, he got out of bed and returned to the table. Into the map he traced a new line, the route the Committee originally proposed for Burke's expedition. The line began in Melbourne, Howitt depositing a faint mark as he progressed north across the paper.

Long before his name was announced as leader of this search party, Howitt dreamed of darkening these empty spaces. With pencil and boots, he would imprint

his own signature into the map's unfilled regions, evidence of much more than his party's progress. Now, he found himself on the periphery of fulfilling these wishes. From this moment, he would work to secure his position inside the echo of history.

In the past weeks, as he gathered information about Burke's expedition, he has imagined the days ahead and what it will be like to retire alone each night to his tent and review his party's progress. The thought called forth childhood innocence, those times, in England, when he would wait until his parents had gone inside so that he could walk unattended to the river's edge and dig into the earth, the names of faraway places tingling through his body. Unlike that child, he would not measure his current progress by a steadily rising pile of dirt but instead through the act of naming places where there are no names, places of rock and water, dust and scrub. All his life, he has wanted to uncover whatever secrets reside in the depths of this land. All of the secrets that lie out there, where Burke and the others linger. The unmapped landscape. Unborn, he nearly thinks, though he knows that its birth occurred long ago and has nothing to do with him or Sturt or Robert O'Hara Burke.

THERE WERE DAYS when Burke told them that he could smell water.

Stop, he said. They were three weeks from the camp on Cooper's Creek, heading deeper into the north. Do you smell it?

They gathered alongside him, the three others, and gazed into the toneless horizon.

I can't smell a thing, King thought, but some thoughts he knew to keep to himself. He waited for one of the others to answer.

Smell that! Burke said.

King closed his eyes. He concentrated, freeing himself of his other senses. Nothing came. It wasn't until he looked at Wills — eyes closed, a grimace on his face — and saw he, too, could not answer, that King finally understood. It isn't there, he wanted to say. Maybe it has never been there at all. He stepped away from the others.

What Burke meant, King later understood, was for them to remember. It was not so much the search for a present scent of water as a summoning of all that came before: traces of their individual histories that, if tapped, could guide them back to all they had known and been. What Burke meant was for them to unlock their memories of water. Rivers and creeks, oceans and bays, waterscapes that flowed clear or brown, stagnant pools of green. It did not matter which artery they struck, any memory would suffice.

He began to recite the names of all the bodies of water he had known. He was twenty-four years old. He had lived on three continents. Three lives led among water and its absence. Some things he has known long before his time in the desert. There are disparities in the sacredness of water. In abundance, it can be more nuisance than gift. Strange, the ways that landscape will alter our gods.

By the time King opened his eyes, it was over. The others had moved on, continuing their heedless march into the north.

From that day, Burke led with his nose. He flung whispers of hope against their ears, spoke of a symphony of smells. Along the flat track of earth, he carved a path for the others to follow.

Why had he been resistant? King now wonders. Burke's embellishments were nothing more than a means to quicken their arrival and ensure their safe return, he thinks, as he stands in the middle of the clearing and watches the four natives approach.

They walked from day to day without break, the heat thickening as the extreme north opened before them, a mirage of all their lives had ever been and were ever meant to be. In his certainty, Burke issued promises. Those promises came once or twice a day in the first weeks. Later, they came hourly.

It won't be long before ...

Once we reach ...

By noon tomorrow, we will have a clear view of ...

Most thoughts, he never finished.

In single file, they followed. The vastness of the red earth dwindled to the length of the stride of the man in front. At the humblest tree, they paused to relieve their bodies. In the holy shade, they learned to rotate themselves like meat on a spit. Amnesty from the unending glare came in intervals, segment by segment. Each man made private promises that he would return to the city a true believer, worshipper of all he had once forsaken.

On they moved. The intervals between their unrelenting footsteps, minutes like hours that marked the passage of this time when their lives hung suspended above something that they could not name. They walked until each man grew convinced that he had stumbled upon the trail of Burke's prophecy. They walked until they began to

fear their false claims would lead them to the edge of the earth or the end of time. For King, there came a point when it no longer mattered which came first.

In the dragging of their boot heels, they heard the names of all those who had gone before, names passed down through time. Mostly it was a single name, Leichhardt, the one who had gone before them only to dissolve into the red earth, he and his party never to be found. They prayed, each man in his own way, for a different fate, promising to be true to their new religion forged in the desert.

And when they finally did arrive? Did they turn their backs on the water? Has his memory at last proven unfaithful?

The time has come.

King looks up to see them approaching, four natives, five. Back then, at the Gulf, his feet were the first to touch the water. He pressed his fingers into the wet sand. Foam danced on his wrists, its whiteness like a revelation. This is what he thinks of, now, here, as the men reach out to him.

Those hands he now turns upwards. He extends his arms, reaches out to the five men who watch this pale figure who has come to surrender, a white man, orphan of the desert sea.

Please, he wants to shout. Help me, please. But the words, even if they did not fail him, would do no good. He turns his palms downward. Waits for their signals to begin.

Their language, when it finally comes, is not at all what he expected. It is too fluid, too fast. He would like to memorise these gestures, the tilting of heads, fingers in determined quiver. If only they would go about this business more slowly. If only they would take the time to guide him, step by step, through these motions. He tells himself that he will practise these signs that they write into the night air. Later, after

they have taken him in. When he is safe at last, removed from his betrayals, all of the crimes he committed in the desert, those bodies he abandoned in the cavernous dark.

The images rush back. Even after the signalling ceases and the first native lays his hands upon King's shoulder, it all comes back. They sniffed the dry air in search of moisture. The first death. Then there were three. Three men lost in the continent's belly, each struggling against the memory of water.

HE RENTS A room in Queen Street, two blocks from the station. Here he will wait for Thomas to arrive. Along those two blocks and up three flights of stairs, William Wills lugs his book-filled crates.

On the morning of his arrival, he makes three trips to the station and up to his high-ceilinged room with its single window that overlooks an alley against whose wall a woman has lifted her skirts to draw a man into her. With his elbow, he clears the moisture from the windowpane and looks with scientific interest upon the clumsy coupling below. The woman places her arms around the man's neck, exposing the bottle in her right hand. A look on her face at once bored and devious, Wills thinks. Though he knows he should turn away, he cannot help from staring as she places the bottle to her lips and then presents it to her companion, who, without acknowledging her offer, continues his violent shuddering. Again, he wipes the pane. This time, the slight movement draws the woman's gaze upward. To Wills, she grants a terse smile before letting her head fall back, mouth open in pain or delight.

Wills drags the crates from the station to the entrance and then works his way up the staircase, mindful of the noise. He wants to tread lightly across the interiors of this new life. From his reading, he knows that it takes time to adapt to new surroundings, and that metamorphosis occurs in isolation. Along with the knowledge that awaits him inside the pages of the heavy volumes in his crates, patience, he thinks, will come like an additional gift.

That first night, he unpacks and settles into this spell of waiting. He sets himself a schedule: four hours of study each evening, during which time he will not rise from the small desk he has moved from beneath the window and placed against its opposite wall. This period, he will follow with a light dinner, should he be hungry, and then the hour that he looks forward to each day, when he will open his edition of Pope and

anoint the room with poetry.

Before poetry, work. On the desk, he places what he thinks of as the Crucial Volumes that give him direction, *A System of Modern Geography* and *The Elements of Astronomy*. He lays them side by side, opens each to the page where he left off before he departed Sydney. With one hand, he makes notes, while the other hand traces the words across the page so that they may enter him whole.

Early the next morning, he washes his face and sets out in search of work. By mid-afternoon, he meets someone who offers assistance. Wills sits before the bald and burly man whose accent he cannot identify.

I've got three words for you, son, he says, placing his great bulk against the creaking table. *Ball. A. Rat.*

Could you please repeat that? Wills asks.

You heard me, son. *Ballarat*. With his hand, he forms a pistol, winking at Wills, who assumes the man has dropped his thumb onto his index finger to fire a bullet of invaluable advice.

The next meeting lasts fewer than two minutes, the time it takes Wills to explain himself.

If you're not interested in gold, young man, then why in hell's name have you come here?

He learns to sleep in the afternoon, the whores' cackling nightcalls too unsettling for him to establish the coordinates of any dream. Only over his books, spread out among journals and the cup of tea that his landlady brings from downstairs each evening, can he free his mind and body from the persistence of their taunts. They have begun to call out to him when his shadow passes, book in hand, in front of the window.

Pretty boy.

Come down from your heights and show yourself.

Think of all the whatnot those books don't give you that we can.

For several seconds, it comes like a chant. Then silence. The longer he ignores them, the more raucous their heckling grows. Until one night, when he does not move from his desk and no shadow crosses the closed curtain. On this night, they throw pebbles and sticks at his window, the occasional shoe, its patter and thud a provisional hailstorm. He extinguishes his light and stands behind the blind, looks down on the three women who share a single bottle, celebrating their latest amusement. Within the half-hour, they depart from the alley one by one, arms locked with a man. Wills returns to his desk. Tonight, there will be no time for Pope or any other frivolities that he allows himself if he is to secure the secrets held in his books, all the knowledge that he has travelled from England to attain and use in the new country.

More rejections follow the next day. He learns to speak of that gold-mining centre, Ballarat, before his interviewer has a chance to name it. Afterwards he walks westward through the city, not bothering to glance for passing traffic as he crosses the street, instead relying for direction on his peripheral vision, his sense of sound, knowing that he must block his ears to the noises of life if he will ever learn to navigate by instinct alone. This, he thinks, is what the books on his desk will teach him. It is what he must learn so that when his time comes he may enter his new life fully armoured.

He turns south. Walks ten feet, short steps, arms at his side for balance, this blind gliding through the streets and alleyways of his new life.

First comes the memory of contact, then the smell. Even in these Melbourne streets, two months later, he can recall everything about the moment. The collision of

bodies. Her devastating warmth. How does one meet another person? He had been in Sydney for two days. Two days. There were hundreds of people all around. Yet somehow he found her. They found each other. How did it happen? It comes back to him now, as it all came to him in that moment when he first smelled her, somehow felt her warmth enter his body long before the fabrics of their clothes merged. His apology as he introduced himself. The way she repeated him word for word, parroting his voice: *William John Wills, from Devon*, as though these were details she already knew and the collision was planned merely to remind her. The way she raised one eyebrow as he stuttered through another apology.

The way she pivoted on her left foot and turned her back on him, walked away. William John Wills stuttering, actually stuttering in his thoughts, as he watched her move to the corner and glance back one last time. He had never seen anything like it: the colour of her eyes, one green, the other grey.

More than once, during his first days in Melbourne, he has thought about this young woman as he watched the whores beneath his window. More than once, he has exchanged their faces for hers, ashamed of himself for doing so as they are pushed higher into the dark corner of the alleyway by men who do not look at them during the quick violence of their act. He knows that such fantasies are unproductive, knows the destructive powers that lie outside his room, far from his books. Still, he is unable to stop himself from thinking of her in the night and often, too often, during the day, the few moments when they stood facing each other on a busy street in Sydney and it seemed to him that they were meeting all over again.

Pardon me, Wills said that day, once he was able to speak at all, to the first person he saw walk past. Do you know what happens inside that building? He pointed to the door into which the young woman disappeared.

That building?

Wills nodded

Always crazies coming and going from that building.

What do you mean, crazies?

You know. *Crazies*. Theatre people and some such.

IT IS EARLY evening by the time they spot the coaching inn. Welch is the first to see it. He rides alongside Howitt and points to the lone building nestled between a sharp bend in the river and the foot of a hill. From this distance, Howitt can make out nothing more than a faint sliver of pale brown, a colour no different from the slope of earth. If this were a test, Howitt knows, then he, and not his surveyor, would have failed.

They reach the inn within the hour. On closer inspection, the building appears to have been designed not for practical use but instead as a prop erected and then abandoned, actors and audience relocated downstream where another, grander set awaits. Howitt and his men tread the small structure from edge to edge. They sniff like stray dogs at the untried territory, determining the merit of Welch's discovery.

At the entrance, Howitt dismounts and tells the others to wait while he goes inside. He opens the canvas bag that holds his official orders from the Committee and searches for other letters of introduction that, to those on the outskirts of the colony, will speak of money and all of the power that comes with it. They will, he hopes, open any door in the colony and, should he succeed, all of the doors beyond.

The others watch as he steps inside. Astride their newly acquired horses, they stretch. In these early stages of summoning the patience and endurance that have abandoned them in city life, they appeal for slowness, the preservation of mind that begins inside the body, for what (and that is the question that will not loosen its grip: what?) lies ahead.

Several minutes pass before Howitt returns. He steps from the building, hat in hand, offering a toothy grin. It is the first time that Welch has seen him display happiness. He is finally at ease with the privileges of his position, which he has only now been able to try on like a new pair of boots. With his hat, he shields his eyes from

the evening sun, motioning for them with his free hand.

Come on in, he says. There's a man inside who says he'll take care of us.

The only light comes from two small windows on either side of the door. An hour passes, one round of drinks, another. There, inside the coaching inn, stories flow as between lifelong friends separated by time and geography. Along with their tales, they pass food and drink, sacred forms of regeneration. Each man dangles episodes from his life for the others to carry along the unmarked trail in case he, too, vanishes in the desert.

They are sitting over empty plates when Welch makes the sighting, his second of the evening. Through one of the dirty windows, he sees the first hint of disturbance in the water, a slight rippling. At first, he fights the impulse to rise from the table and investigate this vision (perhaps it is only an animal drinking at the river's edge, he thinks, a fish that has broken the surface) and turns to his drink.

Then he sees it again. This time the rippling rises, higher than before, closer to the bank. Welch pushes his plate forward. It is there in full: the figure has surfaced from the brown water, it has crawled onto the bank.

There is no need to worry, he tells himself. It is some nightmare from his past, a strange spirit called forth by one of the empty bottles on the table. Then another thought, the one that he has been trying to stave off from the moment he arrived on this continent as a child: perhaps it is some strange beast spawned in the desert, at last awoken to confront the white man.

For the next few moments, all the noises in the room are muffled. Welch does his best to read lips — Vinning and Aitkin complimenting the food, Howitt saying that they better not get used to it — but his mind cannot stay with them. He is already

gone, far from this room, to the other side of the door that protects him from whatever stirs in the darkening beyond.

The figure (if that is how Welch should define it) seems to be covered in mud. It has reached the building. It stares at him from the other side of the window, all four limbs moving.

A strong gust of wind shifts its hair. The door creaks open. Howitt, Aitkin and Vinning turn at once to face it: Welch's nightmare, hunched and silhouetted in the threshold.

INCREDIBLE THAT THEIR bodies could go on. Incredible, King thinks, as the natives pull him to his feet, that they had been able to rouse enough strength for one final push.

It was nearly dusk when they staggered into the abandoned camp, the three of them: Burke, Wills, himself. Wills was the first to see the inscription carved into the tree — DIG UNDER — but it was King who obeyed the command. His tired hands penetrated the earth. Wills knelt beside him. Within minutes, they uncovered the small crate and drew it to the surface. They offered it up and waited.

Burke lowered his long body to the ground. The creaking of joints, other groans of fatigue as familiar to King as his own breathing. Burke fumbled with the leather straps. From the crate, he lifted the single page that had been torn from a journal. In the silence of the camp, he read, lips moving to each line. From their position beside the tree, King and Wills could see neither the writing on the page nor the movement of Burke's lips. Only when he began to read the letter a second time did they acknowledge his contorted face. Burke's body slumped against the tree whose order had been to dig.

Water, he said. King rose to retrieve the bag.

Burke turned to Wills. What day is it? What date?

Wills opened his journal, turned to his last entry and added one day. April 22nd, he said.

Burke looked at the date of the letter in his hand.

The mind, if tempted, can refuse the body's will to go on. When the body is given a reason to surrender, the mind must persuade it otherwise. A handful of words on a page. That was all it took, that is all it takes.

Burke read the letter aloud. They listened to him speak of Brahe's decision to lead the others out of this camp earlier that day, several hours before. And in the silence, all that they thought but could not say: they were alone, again. Their fears were at last confirmed. No one awaited their return.

Burke spoke. It is up to us, he said. As it has always been.

As it will always be, King thinks, as the natives lift him into the air. He struggles to think of anything other than that hole beside the tree, empty until they knelt beside it once again. King placing his broken pocket watch on top of an old fish bag and four leather journals. Wills turning his back on the two others, his fingers fondling some hidden item at the bottom of an instrument box. Each man looking up in surprise to find Burke holding a white kid glove to his nose, Wills shaking his head as he turned away. Burke eventually relinquishing the glove, along with a bundle of letters, his body trembling. They watched as he placed everything inside a canvas bag, lowering it into the hole at the base of the tree along Cooper's Creek.

Back then, at the tree, there had been more. There was all that Brahe's letter did not say. In the prolonged silence that followed Burke's reading, there lingered everything that Brahe's words were incapable of conveying: that the others left the camp earlier in the day with fresh legs and full stomachs. That they had not lived as Burke, Wills and King had lived in these past months, each man falling slowly out of his body until it slipped beyond his control in their slow drift across the barren inland sea.

Chapter 4: Recent Myth

GALWAY. HE IS twenty-seven. What is his life? What steps has he taken to consign a biography to these years that have passed without affirmation? For some time, he has believed that victories await elsewhere, far from Ireland. His chance to claim them has finally come.

Through family connections, he meets distinguished men who appear before him nearly biblical in their roles as custodians of his future. They ask few questions. In return, he offers even fewer statements about his abilities and experience. With a steady hand, he signs his name to the necessary documents.

There, Burke thinks. It is done.

He travels.

Within days of his arrival in Italy, he is singled out by superiors who witness his physical prowess, his endurance and dignity. They watch him walk with confidence across lines of class and rank. As they note his skills in training and sport, they nod to one another in the manner of men whose lives are codes of secrecy.

Soon come meetings with men who move effortlessly from solemn authority to jovial banter and back again. Is this an acquired skill? Burke wonders. If so, does he show the first stages of possession? More swiftly than acquiring full command of his responsibilities as an ensign, he discovers the power and influence of uniform. Each day, he slips into cavalry lines and meetings with an ease that cannot be learned but which comes to him, he likes to think, quite naturally.

He knows that he must cultivate his abilities. He must show them that he is willing to work beyond whatever natural gifts he may possess. There are long moments of eye contact, unspoken understandings. These surface measures of character that, to those he has set out to impress, will prove more essential than any intellectual labour he could conduct in the solitude of a small room and later produce on demand.

There are days of work, exhausting work that he carries out admirably and without question. These days are followed by nights of relief and the beginnings of what turns into incessant gambling, first among his fellow soldiers and then in dimly lit rooms among civilians.

For a man of his character, unable to make decisions that concern his own fate, he believes he has found a new religion, a church he can enter without solemnity or fear. It is a religion he learns to respect, and his charm, the *élan* he displays whether in victory or defeat, carries him to larger altars, before which he is more than happy to kneel.

There are women. There are always women. They come to him in the drunken chatter of parties, drifting into his lair under cigar smoke and fumes of drink. To their husbands and fiancés, they give as pretence for their departure from one room to the next the delight of hearing his piano playing and voice. The Irishman has promised to deliver a performance tonight.

They enter the room and glide, shoulders back, to be near him. They offer themselves in the cool night, diplomats from countries whose borders change like wild rivers, erratic waterways he wants to reach into with cupped hands. Take this (he cannot help himself) and drink.

They speak to him in his accent and their own, while, in turn, he tutors them in

voice and piano. There are short group gatherings followed by a more patient individual tutelage on the temperament and many offerings of Robert O'Hara Burke, recently promoted lieutenant in the Austrian Army. In crowded rooms filled with harmonies of perfect pitch and perfume, they open their lives to him. Smooth necks of russet and cream. Dark skin, pale skin, freckled, unblemished. They lean into him with a proximity and pleasure that would appear inappropriate, an intimacy that could only encourage judgement, should an outsider stumble upon these sessions.

Each weekend, they assemble around his piano and point to everyday objects whose existence his accent grants new meaning. He plays the game well. He knows its rules are unwritten, he can bend them to his desires. And so he writes the rules as he goes, moulding them like clay until he is satisfied. To certain words, he offers enhanced nuances that come otherwise only when in the company of fellow countrymen or when his tongue has been numbed by drink. But these are nights of abstinence, for he is afraid of what he might miss, the smallest detail that morning light can make holy.

He carries their laughter and lightest brushes (elbow seeking elbow, forearm pressed against his side) as minor pleasures that guide him through the ensuing routine of his week. During that time, he considers each prospect, weighs with liquid eyes the politics and geographies of these vibrant representatives from the continental countries that assemble each weekend around the piano as though he were the Grand Ambassador, and it is in such terms that he has begun to think of himself.

There are those who come because they have already partaken in his evenings of entertainment. Some have heard about the charismatic Irishman. Others, he draws into the room by the strength and energy of his voice alone.

By the end of the night, each of them will have exchanged glances. They will

share private tales of this man whose scar some claim was earned in a duel to defend his honour or through a valiant episode on the battlefield, while others believe it to be nothing more than an unfortunate childhood accident or, much worse, the relic of some drunken brawl. About the many accounts of its origin, Burke offers no light of truth. Instead, he swims inside the dark mystery of suppression, that uncharted island where myths are born or, at the very least, nurture themselves before swimming out into the world. What is said has been thought, he thinks. All that has been thought has the capacity for truth.

He lays the unfilled pages of his life on their laps like a musical score. Whatever they name into being, he knows, will be more glamorous and dignified than anything he could present to them as fact. He overhears their stories while pretending to listen to a fellow officer. He practises the meticulous mechanics of gesture, precise nods and quick flashes of eye contact that keep the officers engaged while allowing him time to circle the room and snare the latest gossip from their lips. Some of these lips he has touched with the back of his glove. Others, with bare fingers, warm and loose from a recent recital during these Italian nights that he fills with melodies of anticipation.

THE NIGHT BEFORE Thomas arrives, he leaves his room for what seems like the first time in weeks. He wants to walk down to the river. Nothing odd about it, Wills tells himself, trying to ease the anxiety he feels each time he closes his books and stacks them neatly on his small desk. *There is always more to do, always*, he wrote to his mother only the day before. Earlier, when he remembered that he worked through the day without stopping for lunch, he realised that Thomas's first request would involve being shown around their new city. He also knows what Thomas will say once he learns that his older brother has been holed up in a small room in Queen Street for two months and hasn't bothered to find a regular drinking haunt.

Studying rocks, William? For that you could have stayed home.

He likes the fact that, here in his darkening room, the distance of two oceans separating them, he can summon Thomas's voice, his mother's and father's. They are a world away, a lifetime. Though the geography of their bodies and faces changes like plants that he rotates to the light, he has learned to keep them near by clutching their voices.

Above all, it is the memory of Thomas that William clings to with the greatest intensity. He has waited for Thomas to join him so that they can begin their lives together on this continent. There are times, though, when he is certain that his younger brother thinks of this journey as an interlude in the story of his life, merely something to offer at the dinner table when he returns to London to begin in earnest. Still, he will try to convince Thomas that something else awaits, another life, one altogether different from anything he has envisioned.

For some time, he has thought of this place as his very own undiscovered country. It will open for his eyes alone. With his knowledge, he will bring the land to life, boot heel by boot heel, journal entry by journal entry.

William Wills turns north-east into the clattering promise of night. Near the corner of Market Street, two women hiss from a narrow laneway. He moves on, not daring to glance back until he reaches the corner. The women raise their arms in anger, their entwined voices demanding explanation for his casual dismissal. Down the hill he walks, a three blocks' descent, the dull thud of his boots providing counterpoint to the night sounds.

He smells the river before he sees it. Walks upstream, away from the docks. Past the ferry and through thickening scrub, the trees white and bald. Out he comes onto the grounds of the fish market, continuing until he reaches a bend in the river where no light settles save from the heavens.

There is peacefulness in the quiet dark of nature, he thinks, as he stares down at the water, its slow churn diamond black. It is a peacefulness that he has searched for elsewhere but to no avail. For a moment, he thinks that the scene before him — the gentle river, its lush banks — could be elsewhere, England, perhaps, and he refuses himself a skyward glance to locate stars that would persuade him otherwise. He closes his eyes, listens for a foreign sound, anything that will remind him of how far he has come, how far he has yet to go.

The sharp thump slides across the river's surface: the sound of an axe blade entering a tree. Another moment passes before he sees its origin. On the opposite bank, two men walk close together, a third man trailing behind. One of the two in front stumbles, arms behind his back. William steps closer to the water's edge for a clearer view. His right heel finds mud and he slides several feet, reaching for a branch to steady his fall. For this reason, he does not see what happens next. Once able to look up again, he sees that the man in front now lies face down. The two others stand on either side of him. They deliver swift kicks to the fallen man's side and lower

back. Wills watches the bobbing of their heads, quick movement of their mouths, violence aching across the water.

They pull the man to his feet and repeat the scene. The beaten man's head lolls backward. Then it comes: a flash of metal in the moonlight. The knifeman switches hands, the blade flying back and forth through the air, as his companion pulls the man to his knees. The blade now held at chest level for the fallen man to contemplate. A sudden thrust. Two bodies merging at the shoulders. In unison, they fall. William sinks away from the bank, behind the tree that gleams in the night.

The knifeman kneels beside his victim and pulls the blade back into the world. He and the other one then kick the dying man before they turn and head for the slope that leads south from the river. Once they are out of sight, Wills steps closer to the bank, his heavy breathing all he can hear. He turns towards the lights of town and begins to run. Stopping to catch his breath, he looks back one last time. They have returned. Dragging the dying man to the river, they place his body into the shallows like a small vessel, which they set adrift.

The next morning, he wakes to the sound of knocking. He opens the door to find his landlady, no longer surprised by the room's tidiness, peering over his shoulder.

There's a man downstairs for you, Mr Wills. Says he's your brother?

Wills rubs his eyes. What time is it? he asks.

Nearly eight o'clock, she says. Doesn't look like he's your brother. Should I send him away?

I will be down in one moment, he says. He is buttoning his shirt when the door creaks open.

Thomas. He has always known that the two of them look nothing alike. Thomas,

with his dark hair and wide jaw, the younger brother who in youth outgrows the firstborn. They embrace, each holding on to the other while inspecting for changes.

You're early, William says.

I arrived last night but got, well, delayed. He grins, and William pulls him closer, his palms slapping Thomas's strong back.

I think we'll be needing a bigger place, Thomas says as he surveys the room.

Wills pushes him away and shakes his head. We're not staying here.

HERE IS BURKE at the piano. A bouquet of dresses surround him, fragrances distinct as fingerprints. He turns to the woman at his left.

Please, he says, motioning for her (the summons she has heard about) to sit beside him. The warmth of one body entering another through consenting fabrics. There are, he thinks, few pleasures greater than this.

His left hand strokes the keys while the other cups the lower back of the red-haired Frenchwoman or raspy-voiced German or mystifying Italian. There are women in this room whose appearance changes everything, their mere presence enough to crush the order of night.

Tonight, he has chosen. It is the Italian. For three weekends, she has been absent from these gatherings. His right hand begins a slow massage of her lower back, short strokes, gently bid, as he guides her beside him. He has rehearsed these motions with more patience than the compositions he renders for them, hand touching lower back with utmost delicacy, as though from that touch he will receive all of the curative remedies of their respective countries.

His other hand, pale and scarred from forgotten encounters, rests over hers. Their fingers move to the high keys. The sound of ivory against board, a dense tap whose volume exceeds that which ascends from the instrument.

Listen, he says.

She turns, uncomprehending, to face him.

He presses his fingers into hers. There, he says. To all in the room, her smile remains concealed. To all but Burke, that is, whose hands cover hers, protecting and claiming them.

To each woman, he bestows a feeling of singular attention and respect. His gift to make them feel that they are alone with him, that, when by his side, nothing else

matters, there is no one of greater importance. During these nights, there are no jealousies. Each knows she will have her turn. For now, though, they understand that this gentle playing is between the two at the piano, this playing gently of a music that sinks below the surface of the room.

A party late in the year 1847, late in the night.

One room in a large country house filled with men in uniforms, gallant men who stand straight-backed, drink in hand, and discuss technicalities that, Burke has promised himself, will never concern him. They are men who do not offer what he asks from this life.

Tonight, he has come with intentions. He has come with the anticipation of spending this night beside her once again, the dark one from the south of Italy.

She is long-necked, her shoulders wide. She is the wife of one or another of these men, he cannot remember which, who relishes the authority he holds over the next room. To keep things clean, innocent, he tells himself that the husband's rank and identity do not concern him. After all, he has not met the man, nor has he heard any mention of his name from her plum-tinted lips.

She assumes her position beside him. Together, they work again and again through the simple phrasing. No matter, though. If it takes all night for her to learn this piece, that will not trouble him. He has time.

How could the others not have seen it before? All the differences that set her apart. Mediterranean eyes, expressive and black, the nose of a Caesar. Her mysterious reserve during the preceding weeks that have altered him.

He places his lips to her ear and whispers. Something. What? It makes her laugh. Her fingers caress the pendant on her necklace. She makes no attempt to disguise the

quickenings rise and fall of her collarbone. A mouth he finds perfect. A mouth that has never been denied its right to speak, generous and unafraid to taste what life has to offer.

Is this Bach? she asks, interrupting his lesson. Without waiting for an answer, she resumes her fruitless playing of the first half-dozen notes.

He smiles, shakes his head.

No? she says. Are you sure? A look of concentration, and once again her fingers caress the keys.

The notes fall flat.

But I'm positive, she begins, unable to pull the rest of her thought into the light. She breathes deeply, the tone of her voice changes. I know that I've heard this before, she says. It *is* Bach. I'm certain. I once —

He places a finger to those lips so used to their freedom. Earlier in the night, this same finger traced a map of Ireland on the back of her hand, Galway a freckle at the base of her thumb. It was as though they were alone and no one could hear the first in the litany of questions (Where did you learn to play?) that passed between them. Now, he wants to run that same finger along the slope of her neck. Dark and without blemish, a neck carved like an instrument he has never known but whose intricacies he intends to master.

A sudden throb, her pulse against his body.

Are you certain this is not Bach?

Yes. I *am* certain.

No? Well, I must have been wrong. Tell me, she says, opening herself to the keys. What is it? What is it that I am failing to play, Lieutenant?

He rests her hands on top of his and together they strike the first notes. Without

stopping, he leans closer to her, his lips nearly pressed into the hollow behind her ear.

This, he says, is *Burke*.

HE MARKS THE beginning with Charley Gray. His death opens all that has come, all that stands between two points, then and now.

It was dawn. Two weeks after they turned from the Gulf, turned from its dank scent. Again and again, King grapples with what to make of this memory. Finding Gray's body. He knows that he must learn to refer to them properly. First body, second body, third. The order of death, its meaning. He must give them something more than this. Later, he abandoned the second man only to find the other, the third one, Wills. There. Finally, a name.

He speaks that name aloud and the startled natives release him.

Three days had passed since King last saw Wills. He and Burke left the surveyor propped against a tree, one without any messages carved into it, no secrets buried in its womb. They went to look for help. When King finally came upon Wills, he was lying where they had left him. He knew the surveyor was dead long before he reached the body. Despite this, he could not stop himself from talking to fill the emptiness between them. He spoke of all the things that came to his mind and which did not concern their leader's fate. Announcing that news to Wills was a fear greater than any discovery King believed he would make. For this reason, the third death came nearly as a relief.

Did he weep as he closed the surveyor's eyes? Perhaps. Perhaps he wept beside the others, as well. He cannot remember. He knows that the Committee will demand to hear this part of the story. What he does remember, what he will never tell the Committee or anyone else, is this: if in those moments or thereafter he wept, it was not for those men but instead for his own terror of having to set off alone through the desert, the last member of a lost tribe. A tribe that was intent on losing itself, he now

thinks, from the beginning.

And afterwards? They will want to know what came next. He must prepare himself to speak of all that flows from that moment. Unleash the words. Prepare to set the story on fire. Let it burn before them, the flames offering whatever intimations of truth remain.

In the beginning, there were four. They began in silent confusion and ended in death. All but one. He is here now, waiting for the natives to return and lay their hands on him once again. This time he will not frighten them with his voice. He will do whatever they ask. If they can take him from all that he has become, he will gladly remove his clothes and boots. He will paint himself and dance naked alongside them, he will speak in their voice. All of this and more, if that is what it takes.

He inhaled the Gulf air because Burke told him to do so. He can lead the Committee to this point. But what else, what next? If Burke told him to build a fire, he did so without question. Kill a few crows, Burke would say, and he would return within minutes, dead birds spilling from the bag that hung from his shoulder. When Burke demanded that he close his eyes — *Stop. Do you smell it?* — King recalled all the waters of his life, waterways as distinct as books pulled from a shelf and opened to favourite passages. Water gathered at his feet, blue oceans and muddy rivers, streams of floating ice in whose reflection he believed he could see himself, silent until the last. How much water will it take to wash his hands of these sins?

What, then? What, after he turned his back on them — *abandoned* the last two bodies to uphold their posts in the heart of the desert nightmare? There was his sombre, unaccompanied march to the camp beside the creek, this creek. He has returned to the place that saved them all, long ago. It is, he must prepare himself to inform the Committee, precisely what Mr Burke would have ordered.

The voices come to him in waves. Behind the five men, he can see others, women and children moving beside the flames, shadow dancing upon shadow. He takes several steps towards them. He spreads his arms wide, palms turned upward, and raises his eyes to the starless night. Now, he thinks, and his body sinks to the sandy earth, his very own language of obedience and submission. He lets out a long cry, inhuman, wild despite its somnolence.

IT — HE, THIS man who falters like a wounded animal — steps into the dim room of the coaching inn. From his weather-beaten body wafts a fetid air. Welch stares at him for a moment before turning away in fear disguised as disgust.

To the four men who sit at the table to his right, the stranger offers no recognition. Instead, he strikes his fists against the bar in primitive drumbeat. Strength drains from his limbs with each movement, but the pounding persists.

At last, the innkeeper steps from the back room, wiping his hands on the front of his thin apron. To Welch's surprise, the man remains unflustered by this figure who stands before him, as though this were a scene that unfolds every day on the banks of the Loddon River, the local madman come to collect alms.

I need ... the figure begins, but once again his voice fails him. The innkeeper pours a drink, places it before him. In one gulp, he drinks the brown liquid, which erupts from his mouth and onto the bar.

Welch moves his chair, looks away. The sound like a shriek that causes the figure to turn for the first time and acknowledge Howitt's party. He walks to the table, grabs hold of Welch's shirt, falls to his knees, whispers, *What have I done?*

Drink this, Howitt says, placing a glass of water in the man's hands. Most of the water runs from his lips and onto his chin and chest.

The innkeeper returns with a plate of three eggs and two slices of bread. Something soft, he says. For now. There'll be more of that coming. Don't you worry.

Howitt sets the plate on the table beside the bed. Don't talk, he says. You must eat first. He breaks a piece of bread, dips it into the soft yolk and raises the soggy bread to the man's mouth.

He eats, this man who was spit from the river, as Welch continues to believe, only

to be washed up at their feet. When he finishes one plate, the innkeeper brings another. Without chewing, he works his way through half a dozen eggs, a loaf of bread. Howitt fears that he will have little time to hear this story before the man grows sick.

That sickness he sleeps off in a back room, its windows shut against the July chill. After two hours, Howitt checks on him, only to find that he has not stirred. He returns an hour later, refills the glass of water that the man has woken, dry-mouthed, to drink. This time he has no trouble taking the glass from Howitt. Once finished, he lets his head fall back into the pillow, closes his eyes.

It is after midnight by the time he rises. He enters the main room, unsure whether he is walking into or out of a dream. He approaches the table and settles among them. Howitt, Vinning, Aitkin, Welch and the innkeeper tighten the circle.

He stares at each of them, daring someone to speak first.

Howitt obliges. Do you know who we are? he asks.

The man grins.

Unsure whether this is an answer, Howitt continues. We are the party sent to find what has become of the Exploring Expedition. Still uncertain whether the man understands, Howitt offers further clarification: Mr Burke's expedition. Do you know what I am talking about?

The man holds Howitt's gaze.

Do you understand what I have said? Howitt asks, his voice firmer than before.

I have been looking for you, the man says. I thought you would never come.

BURKE HAD NO doubt that the cattle rustlers made attempts on McNulty's farm, the two others. For now, he thought it was best to survey the area and learn as much as he could about the rustlers' habits.

Over a fireless camp on the fourth night, his dreams of piano playing in European parlours shipwrecked by the unfamiliar sounds of his new continent, he woke to a blaze of light piercing the distant horizon. Until that moment, he had given little thought to the consequences of coming face to face with the men he promised to track down and unleash justice upon. In any case, he had no plans to enforce law on a group of thieves who were, should he believe McNulty, most likely murderers as well. Or at least men capable of deeds he was not prepared to name. All he really wanted was to get away for a few days.

The next morning, they rode westward, in the direction opposite the fire.

We've seen enough, Burke said to the two men who accompanied him, and at those words they headed home.

Burke reached his cabin shortly before dusk. He filled two wooden buckets with water and carried them to the tub. He removed his damp clothes, filled the tub and slipped inside. It was as though he had never left.

In the streets of Beechworth the next day, he presents himself as a stern disciplinarian. He has faced up to the growing threats from cattle rustlers and the mayhem they are capable of inflicting. He has done his duty. To those he meets along the road to the station, he makes various promises. He will take the necessary steps to prevent future disturbances. You can be sure of it, he says, the tip of his hat the final flourish in his pact.

Understanding that humour requires proper timing, that a joke must not be

disturbed in embryo, Burke's fellow citizens wait. They give him room to work the charm that in these past years they've come to expect, but the cue to slap him on the back, to break into laughter and make plans to meet later in the pub, does not come. Instead, their inspector turns away, stone-faced, preparing himself to slide, at last, into the duties he has avoided since the heat set in several weeks after his arrival, three years before.

He works.

Days flow one into the next, an unending period of complaints. A bushranger steals a chicken and an entire family — mother, father, four children and grandmother — arrive at the station to contribute their accounts. In the midday heat, he is forced to arrest his closest neighbour for riding furiously through town while intoxicated. A crowd gathers. Bets are placed. There is a brief showdown between police inspector and drunk, who, armed and wobbly on his feet, threatens to alleviate his anger on a nearby window. Between the two shifts a spooked and angry horse. This matter Burke resolves with the promise of a drink and a hot meal. There is a spatter of applause, as though he arranged the scenario as afternoon entertainment. He orders the spectators to go about their business.

After these incidents, a brief drought. Days of southerly winds, streets that grow quiet at dusk. Then, he wakes to find that everything has changed.

There are rumours of revolt, epic in proportion, varied tales of disputes among the gold-mining nations. From the stories he overhears, certain stirrings rekindle themselves, a longing for adventure.

One account tells of an angry mob of miners approaching Beechworth. If it continues to close in on the town, he will have to meet the aggressors in the

countryside or at the town's entrance. There are suggestions of how best to handle the troubles that will soon flood the region. Burke responds by saying that he will use his combined powers as police inspector and town prosecutor. He will write to the magistrate for reinforcements. No matter what happens, he will provide the first line of defence. All of these things he assures the good people of Beechworth.

Then comes other news, news that is more pertinent. A travelling theatre company has arrived. During all the talk about the mining disputes, he has been too busy to notice the signs posted across town. A friend from the local orchestra sees Burke outside his cabin and rides over to tell him. In front of the man, Burke feigns apathy. Why should he concern himself with such nonsense in times like these? Soon after the man rides away, however, he can no longer restrain his excitement.

For the next few days, he forgets all other talk in order to contemplate his entrance. It must reveal the dignity of a gentleman and former soldier but also demonstrate his current authority. He cannot deny the satisfaction he receives from those teatime gossips who pause in front of the station and blush before his window. He pretends to be hard at work during these times, which, he must admit, have lately become less frequent. What would he do if one of them showed more interest than a few words between her sips of tea? he wonders. After these years of temperance, is he finally prepared to act?

He has heard how they evaluate his features. His voice and mannerisms discussed like a recipe carried safely across the equator. These are, he knows, merely times of pretending. How, for instance, to position a Beechworth living room, chaise longue facing northward to the distant latitude of home and the possibility of *what if, what could be, what might have been*, all of the disguises they employ to cover the silence and prevent them from confirming *what is*.

Opening night follows a day of oblique rain. Burke steps into the foyer just as the young ushers call for the audience to take their seats. A small crowd lingers, unsure which doors to walk through, entrance or exit, now that the moment has arrived. He stands back, alone, watching the theatregoers proceed down the aisle. He swaggers behind them and across the front of the stage. On the edge of the second row, he locates an empty seat. From both sides of the aisle come muffled acknowledgements.

Evening, Inspector.

The wave of a hand.

Several nods, the clearing of throats.

He surveys the room, allows the room to survey him. He wants the people of Beechworth to think that he is most comfortable dressed in such attire, this stiff uniform, the collar that in the past year has begun to choke him. On other occasions, he would like them to believe that he was born to sit astride a horse or work in the fields. And he believes that he inhabits each role equally well, that he is one of few among them entirely at home in high society and low, a figure who possesses the experience and knowledge and grace that those in search of the big answer or merely a moment's entertainment will gravitate towards.

The lights dim.

He settles into his seat.

Leans back, crosses his legs.

The curtains part.

Once he has found his way home, there are dreams of her but no sleep. He lies in an unmade bed, pulling at the chain of memory like a sailor drawing an anchor from its depths. The greater the resistance, the better, he thinks. He must be precise in his

actions, patient from this moment on. He has waited far too long to spoil this occasion, this challenge that has offered itself. This actress, her gestures, her voice and eyes. He cannot believe it: one is green, the other grey.

Let it all come slowly, he thinks. Then: Let it all come now.

He wakes before dawn, his head throbbing. He does not remember drinking last night, either in town after the performance or later, when he arrived home alone and out of sorts, but the feeling is unmistakable. Along with the headache comes a pre-dawn light that reveals visions crueller than those which lured him through the night.

A moment's eye contact (Act I, Scene II) from this actress, this Julia Matthews. A quick flutter of her lashes, and here she is, just as she was on stage, singling him out in the crowd. One night, and already she has shown him the path to an obsession far greater than any of those European parlours prepared him for.

From his closet, he removes the uniform that is reserved for the magistrate's rare visits. Tonight, he will return to the theatre wearing this uniform, his best. Once perfectly fitting, it now drapes from his shoulders and pinches his waist. No matter, though. In it, he will awe her, this Miss Matthews — *Julia*, as he has already allowed himself to say in that private language that pushes the borders of desire.

The day is a fragmented resonance of unfinished conversations, an occasional line of her dialogue that he has set aside to caress during the empty hours. With any luck, he thinks, he will see her before the performance. The tilt of his hat as she passes him on the street. This memory he will impart for her time in the dressing room before he sees her again. Something to remember him by. For now.

He visits the town's hotels and shops, making enquiries about the company. In his questioning, he is careful not to betray his intentions. He speaks of the town's

economy, his own role as guardian.

All the while, he finds no sign of her.

The second performance passes more eventfully than the first. The actors are finding their rhythm. They are also gaining attention. The townspeople have come out to test these unfamiliar waters, and this night's performance unfolds before a nearly packed house.

On the third night, he arrives early and sits (front row, stage left) in a chair all but reserved for him. Anyone else who has returned will believe that he has come simply for the sake of a night's entertainment. He is nothing more than a man out on the town in search of culture. This final statement he revises throughout the day, already guilty of something he has yet to comprehend.

She steps onto the stage, her expression calmer than the night before, this girl — *woman*, he corrects himself — still susceptible to stage jitters. Halfway through this performance, he begins to inhale the words and music of her songs. Hands placed on thighs, he moves his fingers to the music. He presses at the muscles in his legs, makeshift keys, her voice a benediction.

About the rest of the performance, those players and nuances of plot that neglect her presence, he expends little energy. In her absence, he finds missed opportunities, lifeless bodies that fill the stage. If only she could be worked into this scene or that, he thinks. The ending would be much more powerful if ...

As she stands before the audience and bows, he is the first to rise.

Now come days he glides across, white days that stretch before him as smooth as paper. The nights of pattern and ease inside the path of her life grant order to his

routine. Some mornings escape his notice altogether. He wakes later and later. He must conserve his energy, he thinks. News of the disputes in the gold mines, those interruptions, minor compared with her presence, await him at the station. He settles over work that he discarded months before.

There are petty offences that he must now remember or invent. This keeps him focused. At noon, he leaves the station to make his rounds. His exchanges with shop owners are succinct, professional. There are no jokes, not today, not anymore. Though these men remain uncertain when to cite Burke's moment of change, nothing, it seems, is as it was.

When Burke leaves, they visit one another to talk about his recent behaviour.

Did you see that?

Not sure if I did, quite frankly.

Haven't seen him like this since he first came to town.

I've never seen so *much* of him.

He comes around every day now.

That he does.

Makes me wonder what he knows that we don't.

They devise theories. Tribes of armed natives lurk on the outskirts of town, their preparations for attack complete after all these years. Gold diggers who have lost their luck are coming to unleash their fury on unsuspecting settlers, *us*.

Their suspicion inspires anger, followed by the brand of silence that breeds fear.

She has a mother. That news should not surprise him, of course. Still, it changes everything.

He has always assumed that actresses are free from certain societal constraints, but

how could he not have realised that she would be travelling with someone, a family member, a *mother*? Did he expect that a woman of her age would come to the fringes of the colony without supervision?

He learns about their arrangement in a review of one of her previous plays, the mother who travels with her starlet daughter, managing time and money. Protecting her, he thinks, from men like himself.

Two days later, as he steps outside the station, he sees them strolling together — mother and daughter, arms locked. The evening is a spectrum of browns. The scene would be entirely monochrome if not for the glow of their dresses, nearly matching outfits of white and blue, a parasol their shared halo.

For a moment, it is as though his concentrated efforts have called her from backstage and onto the street, her presence at last made available to him during daylight hours.

He has seen women in dresses before. Some of them, he has observed walking together, much like these two now. But never before has he taken such careful notice of each movement of neck and wrist, the poetry of gesture.

They glide from storefront to storefront. An occasional motion from the mother (he sees where Julia got her looks) followed by a slow, dutiful nod from the daughter. Beneath the shared balloon of dress is grime, some of which collects around their combined hem. The purity of their bright dresses bruised brown. Where are her feet?

He stands empty-handed in front of the station. One moment, he is upright, rigid, the next he is slouched. He cannot decide which pose will be most effective to greet her as she approaches him for the first time outside the darkened world of her sorcery.

Even before they pass, he begins to revise the scene. He marks each subtle movement, attempting to consign the colour and light of this evening to canvas. He

will paint it large enough to step inside. He will carry it with him whole. He will cut it into a series of miniatures to scatter along the corridors of his life.

They reach the corner of the station. From this distance, her youth surprises him. In the harsh light of day, out of costume and character, she is a child. She is the much younger sister of the woman who stands on stage each night before a congregation of believers. Her poise and grace, her presence, in one critic's words: *Sparkling, gay and bewitching*. This phrase he has read over and over. By his bedside, he keeps a clipping of that review, now nearly transparent from the wear of his thumb, as though rubbing these words could somehow bring her closer. And perhaps it has.

He removes his hat, bowing, first, to the mother, then to the daughter. *Julia*. Fighting to withhold that word, the fluency with which her name slides from his tongue, he then struggles to subdue something worse, the awful sounds that will not go away when he is in her presence. Should it escape, he believes, they will take this primitive sign as his true nature. A creature slouched against a post in this backwoods town, making an effort to communicate in some language before language.

Then they are gone. As quietly as they approached, the two women dissolve into the uncertain light. With no response to his greeting, without the slightest acknowledgement of his presence, it is finished. Into the middle distance, they saunter, Julia tilting her neck, right hand searching for her mother's waist.

Could she be laughing at him? Has he at last been exposed for what he is, the man who attends each of her performances, sitting always in the same place in the front row, his lips moving along with hers through songs that were never meant to be duets?

Julia's head settles onto her mother's shoulder as she strolls out of his life for two more hours, until the curtain parts. Burke wipes his moustache and beard, an

unconscious motion. In the corner of his mouth, he locates a dribble of saliva, this childhood burden he cannot outgrow.

HIS MOUTH IS blistered, his eyes sunken. He gasps for air but does not welcome it into the depths of his lungs, this man who exists in a world that is theirs and not theirs, this man who has returned to them out of recent myth.

On the whole, he is a tattered affair. His skin is grey, his hair hangs long and twisted over his cracked face. Despite this, they recognise him at once. His shirt and boots, the leather pouch whose thin strap has engraved a necklace of dried blood.

With half-opened eyes, King takes notes of their words and signals as the natives draw him into their arms, this returned traveller of the white tribe. He closes his eyes, gives himself over to them. *Do as you please*, he wants to say as they carry him towards the fires.

Even in this state, half-conscious and dreaming of the great Gulf that Burke ordered him to smell and, later, set his eyes upon, he knows there are things that he will never forget about this moment. The whiteness of their eyes and teeth, the child to his right who jumps for a better view, the singsong lull of the women's voices as he rides through the night air, transported into safety. Wanting to show his gratitude, he attempts a smile but the muscles in his face will not comply. He will wait. They have taken him in. There will be time.

The men begin to fall away. Then, half a dozen women of varying ages surround King's prostrate body. Above him rises a cathedral of arms through which he can see neither foliage nor night sky.

The first of his belongings to go is the leather pouch. Next, his boots, a puzzle through which they struggle for several minutes. Then, they remove his trousers, his shirt.

Satisfied with their work, the women bundle his clothes and place them, with the leather satchel, beside his blistered feet. They seize his skeletal frame, one woman

cupping his head in her palms, another pressing against his swollen ankles.

Onto his chest trickle the first drops of water. Its reprieve brings tears to his eyes. He can hear them, their tender laughter, as his mind slips away. They know that they will lose him before long. For this reason, they continue without interruption. On they go about this cleansing, persevering as he slides deeper into the dream that in the preceding months has become inseparable from his life. The dream that is always the same. The story of the man who finds himself orphaned in the desert, rescued by a tribe whose rites he will adopt.

To his knowledge, he is the only man to have ever been orphaned three times. Passed down through the death of one hand into the death of another, another. Only to be given a new life in this world where all is new, each step the first step.

This is what comes to him as they cleanse his languid body, returning him to a place of comfort he has not known since he was a child, those days before men began to fall at his side, first on the battlefields of India and then here, on this forsaken continent.

Did he ask for this life? Had he pursued it, much as he pursued the scent of water and the meat of birds from one end of this land to the next? Lying beneath the women's working hands, his burden becomes clear. He must uphold the story that is his and not his. For what, to what end? So that one man may survive? So that he may go on to tell this tale, releasing secrets that would otherwise scatter like pollen in the wind? So that the story may go on and on, eternally without end.

THEIR FATHER'S LETTER was brief. *Have arrived in Ballarat. Billings Hotel. Come.* William and Thomas expected word from him in early December. It was now February. When the letter finally came, they could sense the excitement behind its brief order.

They arrive in Ballarat in the late afternoon and traverse through dusty streets towards the Billings Hotel. Twice they stop to ask directions from groups of men whose rusted tools rest upon robust shoulders.

Keep walking until you find the row of weatherboards.

You'll be sure to see it.

Down the long path and into the sunset.

If you see gold, boys, I must have dropped it.

Irish voices. Far behind them trails a group of Chinese. When William and Thomas turn to these men, the Irishmen point into the distance.

Weatherboards, boys.

Couldn't miss it if you tried.

Say hello to Sally.

Tell her we're on our way.

They set off in the direction opposite the men. They walk past tent after tent, women placing laundry on lines, a band of children cursing an escaped chicken, and come at last upon a series of bark huts, outside of which two dogs wrench at their ropes. At first, they do not recognise the lone man across the street. With his hand, he shields his eyes from the swirling dust. William and Thomas cross the street to follow.

I've had the pain for some time, Thomas says, loud enough for his father to hear.

I see, William says. Where might this pain be, young man?

In the chest, sir. Hurts like the devil when I cough. Thomas fakes a cough, each on the brink of laughter but also surprised by how long it takes their father to offer his advice, even more surprised when he turns knowingly to face them.

Boys!

They follow him to the Billings Hotel, where he has secured a second room.

We have two nights here, he says. After that, we'll have to find other arrangements.

They go downstairs for dinner, over which he tells them the news.

I have bought a tent.

A tent? Thomas asks.

And Dr Wills speaks of the plans which, they know, have always included the two of them.

I'll need your help in the morning. There's a man who will deliver our tent. We're to meet him at dawn. He says that we'll be working by late afternoon. I've been here for nearly two weeks and have taken to treating patients in the hotel. I've had to turn many away. I've told them to just wait. I said, Just wait until my boys arrive. He dips his bread into the thin brown soup.

Beyond the small plot where Dr Wills and his sons will establish their medical practice lies rolling land beaten and scarred by human toil. Neither wants Dr Wills to see their disappointment in his choice of this place that feels, to them, unfinished, unwilling to become anything other than what it is now.

All through the day, Dr Wills urges his sons on as they shape the tent into his idea of a workplace. Through the first weeks, they are forced to leave all entrances closed to keep out the dust. Inside the tent, a burning sensation, dry discomfort that leaves

Thomas shaking his head by midday and threatening by evening to go off on his own to try his luck in the goldfields. Anywhere, he says, other than here.

To William, it is as though he never left home. The comfort of his father's voice and ideas. The way he knows which steps the man will take before his feet shuffles across the dirt floor. They were meant to work in this way, William thinks, as he and his father listen to the complaints of miners, their ailments inexplicable until Dr Wills grants them name. They work from sun-up to sundown, sometimes long into the nights that rumble beyond the tent where work has ended and the townsfolk resume their lives.

At the end of the first month, Thomas leaves. For the first few evenings, he visits his father and brother after his work has finished. Over cups of lukewarm tea, they share stories before Dr Wills and William continue their preparations for the following day, often turning their backs on Thomas as though he were a patient they have seen and dismissed.

There are weeks when they do not see him at all, Dr Wills making enquiries among the patients about his youngest son. Then, one day, Thomas reappears, all smiles as he sips his tea, promising when he leaves that he will see them again tomorrow. Both men spend the rest of the evening navigating around Thomas's hollow promise.

Autumn passes, the first weeks of winter. The streets turn to mud. When they see Thomas at last, they hardly recognise him. With new clothes and trimmed hair, he stands in the entrance way, grinning.

Get cleaned up, gentlemen. We've got tickets to the theatre.

IT MUST END here. He must put a stop to this before he gets carried away. Burke makes a pact. He will see her tonight. He will sit through one last performance and watch as she steps among props, characters and scenes before he resumes the natural order of his life. Tonight, he will stop what can only end in madness.

There is, however, always the other hand to consider, he thinks. He has lived inside the heat of scandal before. It would be easy to welcome its return. Smoke and mirrors, he tells himself, nothing more. Nothing to fear.

How does one choose? Had he ever frozen for an answer or decision in the army, he would have gone straight to the infirmary. What, he would have asked after the briefest of physical examinations, is wrong with me? Now, there are no such options. He is caught inside something he does not understand. The last thing he wants is to be released from its grip.

During his first months in the Austrian Army, Burke found a world that opened for him as though it were his own invention. Fortresses of locked doors. Their keys and passwords belonged to him alone. Things, in this way, were no different from his childhood, those early years that overflowed with women. While on laps of aunts or female cousins, he learned gentleness, compassion, the ability to sneak into the minds of others.

Most of all, he learned to listen. He spoke only after the stories drifted away, silenced by male dinnertime banter. When the ladies' talk resumed, Burke studied the shifting of eyes and wetting of lips that occurs in mid-sentence, minor tics that reveal truths greater than those the story in progress claims.

Even during those tales of churchgoing and poorly concealed envy, he believed this practice of listening would instill patience. Through it, he would master the art of fortitude. As he closes the door, setting out for tonight's performance, he wonders

when these skills failed him. He should hate her, this Julia Matthews. This minx who has temporarily settled in this town and altered his life, her existence soon to be nothing more than a record contained in discoloured newspapers.

START AT THE beginning? You want the whole story?

Yes. The whole story. It is important that you tell us the whole story.

The Loddon River. A cold night in late June 1861. Howitt interrupts only when a strand of Brahe's story comes loose or when the German breaks off, uncertain how deep into the well of the past he should lead them.

We had been on Cooper's Creek, camped there for months, waiting for Wright to return. Two weeks before, Burke sent him away for more supplies. We expected Wright within another fortnight. Or, at least, Burke did. When one month passed without any word from him, Burke said that it might take another few weeks.

We were growing tired, weak from waiting.

Our bodies? Yes, our bodies were growing weak from waiting, but there is more to it than that. Something else happens out there. I will put science aside for the moment. I will speak of the mind and the will, the lessening that empty spaces impose. Some madness posturing as ally takes over. In the beginning, you are able to distinguish the opposing voices. If you are lucky, that ability will not fail you.

The only cultivation the desert quickens, I have learned, is the process by which this posturing occurs. Madness spread among us like a virus. How to say it? We were breaking. Perhaps we had already broken. Perhaps what I am telling you is simply what occurs when routines are interrupted. All I know is this: the longer we stayed at the depot camp on the bank of Cooper's Creek — not knowing whether we would move forward or backward, wondering if we would ever move again at all — the more destructive and contagious our thoughts became.

I had not spoken to Burke for three days. By this time, he had already begun to keep to his tent and would come out only in the evenings after we built the fire. We would watch him approach, fearing his reprimand for this or that. There was always something. There were times, you see, when he alone knew the precise art of fire building, or how to boil water. Of course, these are merely examples of his genius, for he could do everything better than the next man. He could be that way, we all knew it, and the longer we sat around the more hot-blooded he became. Often, he would stop whatever he was doing and stare at us, as though he were astonished to find us still with him.

We came to expect those empty gazes. Those moments when he would shout orders and then immediately forget what he said, only to look at us, dumbfounded either by our presence or his own. Then he would turn from us and walk back to his tent and whatever alternate life he began to inhabit in those days before the final severing.

Brahe turns to the proprietor. Please, he says. I need another drink. Whatever you gave me when I first came in.

There was much talk of his absences. With each day, they grew longer, somehow

more peculiar. In the beginning, there were theories. Men with too much time on their hands will begin to trade such theories. Those theories soon turn to jokes. We laid our chatter down to cover the hollow gaps in our lives. I suppose that we expect this type of behaviour from men left to their own devices, nothing but time to eat away at them like some desert insect that Charley Gray spoke of and which we all so greatly feared.

From time to time, Wills would interrupt this talk.

Mr Burke is writing letters to the Committee, he would say. He must have time alone in order to keep a proper record of our activities.

One night, after Wills rose to defend Burke, Landells stood across from him, the fire all that separated the two.

Our activities? Landells asked.

Even before we left Royal Park, there had been tension between Landells and Burke. As we progressed, Burke began to rely more heavily on Wills. It wasn't long before Landells directed some of his anger to our surveyor.

What activities could you possibly mean? Landells continued. Look around you. He repeated himself, his boots stirring the dust. We are doing nothing. Nothing.

Landells waited for Wills to challenge him, but our surveyor was more of a gentleman in the desert than most men are in the city. He said nothing. The breathing fire was all we could hear before Landells spoke again. By then, his voice had fallen to the type of nearly incoherent muttering that takes place when anger reaches its summit.

That, he said, pointing towards Burke's tent, must be one empty ledger.

Then he walked away. No one tried to stop him.

Over time, we learned to see our lives as though they were not our own. It was a method we adopted to preserve ourselves, a means for us to leave unacknowledged

our predicament, what that night Landells reminded us we truly were: a group of Europeans scattered across a landscape that we were all beginning to think no white man was ever meant to see.

We had an unspoken agreement, the kind that can be attained only by those who remain in shared company for uncomfortable lengths of time. Our situation was a comedy. To think of it as anything else was intolerable. Some thoughts you must eliminate as soon as they stir in the periphery of your mind.

That night, Wills pushed our agreement aside. He forgot, if only for a moment, his eminent manners. After Landells walked away, Wills looked at each of us, searching for a culprit, the true reason the party was wedged into a bend of Cooper's Creek, nearly midway between our point of departure and our destiny, all of us waiting on a leader whom half the men already declared mad.

The proprietor reaches for Brahe's empty glass. Would you like another? he asks.

Yes. No. I need coffee. I want to get all of this out, here, now. There isn't much time.

The next morning after breakfast, he called for me. *Burke* called for me. We were sitting around the fire, finishing our tea, smoking. Suddenly, everyone stopped laughing at Charley Gray's story. That's when I saw him approach.

Did he shout my name from that distance, thirty yards, twenty yards away? Even now, if I close my eyes, I can summon the moment. No matter how often I try to uncover that final glimmer of calm, everything remains hushed, obscured behind some curtain too heavy to lift. If he did call for me that morning, then I must have lowered my head. I must have turned from him, unable to face what I knew was to come.

We spend our lives preparing to act appropriately in times of ruin, yet there was

nothing I could do to hide the disgrace I felt beside that campfire. I knew what he wanted. If denying him meant suicide, then granting his wish could mean murder.

He stood next to me, whispered in my ear.

Let's walk, he said. He didn't wait to see if I followed.

For five minutes, we moved in silence, the sound of the loose earth beneath our boots, water lapping below. The smell, even here beside the water, of dryness, always dryness, the kind that obliges you to look up to see whether something has caught fire.

Much later, after he set out for the Gulf, I returned to the bank of the creek to retrace our steps, the path that sealed my fate. Would you be surprised to hear me say that without taking those steps, without that interruption in my morning tea, you would not be here today, that we would not be sitting around this table drinking coffee on the bank of the Loddon River, that those men ...

We walked another twenty yards before he turned to survey the area. Was he looking to see if any of the others had followed us? For natives? In the first few weeks on Cooper's Creek, they had come into our camp, flailing their arms about before leaving with sugar and beads. Burke had no patience for the rudiments of their language. He cared little about their grammar of trade or ways of survival. As long as they feared his pistol, he believed that he retained control. When the natives lost faith in his god, he became distrustful of their presence.

Satisfied that we were alone, he undressed and waded out to the middle of the creek. I had no choice but to follow.

From the water, my chin resting on the cool surface, I could see several children watching us from the opposite bank, their white teeth brilliant in the morning light. Why were they laughing at us? Burke wanted to know. And why hadn't he seen them before? The vein below his left eye throbbed. I told him not to pay them any mind.

They don't mean us any harm, I said. But how could they not laugh at us? The two white men below them, floating in brown water, red-faced, our chests pale as the moon.

Were there predecessors? Had their ancestors seen men like us? If not, how long would it take before they recited stories of the ghosts who came to live beside them on the creek, men who ate their fish and in return offered patches of cloth and beads, sugar, men who descended upon them, lingering, bathing, eating, sleeping, men who grew angry for the very reason that there was nothing more to do but linger, bathe, eat, sleep? We might become a tale they could pass up to future generations like buckets raised from a well. That is how I like to imagine our time among them. In some ways, these thoughts are all that remain, this hope, after everything that has happened, before everything that is to come, that we exist somewhere outside of ourselves, that the story I tell you will one day be told by others, its outcome different.

How strange we must have appeared. With our horses and camels, our boots, the confusion with which we approached each unordered day. As though we never learned to bury our hands in the earth and press our ears to its surface, listening for what it had to tell us.

Burke continued to dwell on the children's presence. He was known to shout things, poorly aimed obscenities. Without fear, I learned in my time with him, there is no anger. I had discovered his fears.

Slowly, just enough so that I could watch as he turned from the children and waded deeper into the creek, I penetrated the water's surface. When I re-emerged, Burke was floating on his back.

Brahe? he asked. Are you listening to me, Brahe?

I swam closer.

There are things I must say to you, things you must know.

But I already knew. We all knew. At first, we kept these *things* for inspiration, stories that composed our religion in the desert. Men in our circumstances, men with needs such as those the desert had helped us develop, learn to permit what others dismiss as folly. We were in need of a saviour.

He spoke of the Committee's instructions. He spoke of John McDouall Stuart's expedition and how our party — *my* party, as he said — was better equipped. He spoke of our race to the Gulf. At Menindee, our last stop before nothingness unrolled before us, we saw a cartoon depicting our leader astride one of the camels, Stuart beside him on horseback. The two men taunting each other onward, all of the pride of their neighbouring colonies like wind at their backs.

Three months had passed since then and Burke held strong in his belief that we would reach the Gulf first. He wouldn't let any scientific endeavour halt our progress. A victory, he said, to be the very first, would change our lives. At times, it was all that he could talk about. Act quickly, efficiently, he would command when one of the wagons sunk in mud. Act quickly, efficiently. For the past months, we had done everything but that. If we failed, then he, too, failed. That day in the creek, he stood in the knee-deep water and looked me in the eye for the first time in weeks.

I have reached a decision, he said.

He spoke of what he had been planning for the past month, alone in his tent, with ledgers and maps spread before him, all the land that would be his empire, and we the soldiers to help him conquer it.

The risk is clear, he said. I know this. I have known it from the beginning.

There were things I needed to say but couldn't. Instead, I told him what I thought he wanted to hear. From the beginning, I said, we all knew he was willing to take

risks. Setting out with him had been a risk. It was the reason many of us wanted to follow him in the first place.

Wright was our last link to the known world. Ferguson had already taken bets on whether we would see him again, this man hired long after our journey commenced and whom few of us trusted. With no word from Wright and concern over our future supplies, splitting the party was the biggest risk of all. That afternoon, my toes sifting through the mud on the bed of the creek, Burke confirmed my fears.

In two days, he said, I will leave this camp and make for the Gulf. I will take three men. At those words, he slipped below the water's surface.

Three men. Those headed north would be ill equipped for the journey. Still, there was not a man among us who would not want to be one of them. To travel so far, only to be turned away. I could not let that happen. In the preceding days, in preparation for this talk that I knew would come, I had convinced myself that he could not afford to leave me behind. I am sure, now, that we all convinced ourselves of this. It was a lie I began to tell myself in this time of weakness, and for another moment I could hold on to it.

At last, he came up for air. He was working his fingers through tangled hair when I built the courage to speak. Who will you take?

Burke looked away from me. William Wills, of course, he said. Also John King.

Two names. Why was he delaying? He dipped his hair in the water, smoothed it. And for my third, he said, I will take Charley Gray.

Please. I need water.

Someone had to stay behind. Someone who would be there when Wright returned with the supplies. Someone who could lead the rest of the party back to safety. *In*

case, as Burke said on the bank of the creek while he dried himself, *we don't return*.

Midway back to the camp, he put his hand on my shoulder. You'll have full command from here on, he said. I've already written to the Committee requesting your promotion. All I need to do is send the letter.

Seeing that my expression hadn't changed, he continued. This new appointment will be with distinction. No matter what happens, you will finish all of this much better off than you began. His grip on my shoulder tightened. Imagine returning home with such a post, Brahe. This will change your life.

I could not look at him. Not until the camp was once again within sight could I finally tell him that this is not what I wanted. Even now, I can hear the tone in my voice. Leave someone else behind, I said, more forcefully than I intended. It doesn't have to be me.

He shook his head.

I would be valuable out there. You know that I would do whatever you ask of me.

Then do this, he said. I need you to do this, Brahe.

I looked away.

He then spoke in German, the language of his years in the military. Each syllable met my ears like a stab. He was trying to wound me. Using this language that was at once familiar but, coming from him, in these circumstances — claiming it as his own, stripping it from me, phrase by phrase — utterly unfamiliar.

Strange the way men act in such times. Despite all, we revert to primal instinct. Burke called forth the sounds of my native tribe in order to make me feel that, together, we were responsible for the others. It was as simple, as complicated, as that.

Don't turn me away, I said. Not after I have come this far.

He nodded, stared that faraway stare of his. And then, for the third time that day,

he turned his back on me.

It began as a scratching, a ruffing against the canvas. In previous days, we all learned the sound was one of Charley Gray's tricks. Gray, shortly before sunrise, pretending to be an animal seeking admittance into our tents. The laughter this caused, at least for those in on the joke, when someone unaware of Gray's propensity for misbehaviour yelled for help. I closed my eyes and went back to sleep.

Then, after another moment, it started again, the scratching, a clawing at the canvas folds. I sat up. That's when I heard the voice, a human voice that sounded, at first, anything but human.

He stood in the entrance, the tent flap over his head. Even after I rubbed my eyes I could not make him out, but somehow I knew. It was Wills.

What is it? I asked. There was no answer. What in God's name is wrong, William?

Still no answer.

Speak to me, William. What is going on here?

I had never seen him like this, timid and uncertain. Suddenly, as though he knew what I was thinking, his demeanour changed. He approached and, leaning into me, grabbed hold of my shirt. It was the first time that he was ever aggressive in my presence. This, you must understand, was not the William Wills I knew.

Look, he said, coming closer. We are in a fix. You know this, Brahe. Someone must take charge here.

I can't do this, William. Please understand. I can't.

What do you mean you can't?

Someone else can stay behind. There's no reason for it to be me.

Wright will return soon with supplies. Someone must be in charge here when he

arrives.

When will that be? I asked. What if Wright never returns?

Mr Burke said he would return. I have no reason to doubt it. You have more than enough supplies to last three months. You must do this, Brahe.

Throughout these months, Wills kept a better record of our journey than anyone else. The distance travelled, the distance that remained, all of the equipment, charts and supplies we used and would need in order to go on. That morning, I sensed it for the first time: Wills was scared. Before then, it was merely an inconvenience, this waiting. Only then did I realise how bad our *fix* really was.

Before I could answer, I heard the sound again, the same scratching against the tent's fabric. I looked up in time to see the top of Burke's high forehead. Once Burke was inside, Wills turned to me and put his hand on my shoulder. He gave me a look, the kind of knowing look — half smile, raised eyebrows — that seems to say an agreement has been reached and everyone can now go about his business.

Mr Burke, he began, formal as the day we set out.

Burke nodded.

Brahe and I have news for you. Wills clutched my hand and shook it forcefully.

Tell me, Burke said, looking at me. What news do you have?

They arranged it all the night before. They discussed which methods would work best on the quiet German. Now I am sure of this. It was as though they gave me a bundle of clothes that had been handed down through generations of hangmen and said: *Take these. Wear them with humility.*

There is no escape from the pacts we make in private. Had all of this happened around the campfire, among the others, you would have nine versions of my story, this story that I no longer understand. It is, you see, no longer my story to tell. It belongs

to others now, men who will soon become interrogators. Men who without knowing the truth will see themselves no less fit to judge my actions. What will they say after they learn what I tell you now, what I have yet to say?

There were three of us that morning in the tent. Only three of us who know what happened, and two would soon be going.

The next day, I tried on those newly acquired clothes for the first time. It was as though I were watching, from a distance, another man's mistakes. How unsettling to be told to sit back, after the warning, and wait for the deluge.

After Wills left, I asked Burke if I could walk with them for the first day. Escort them, as it were, to the gallows. Then I would return to take up my new command on Cooper's Creek. And wait. And pray not for them but for myself.

Is this the oldest story? For now, it is the only story I know. Five men walk off into the unknown. Only one returns.

Brahe turns from the men at the table and repeats the words he first uttered to Welch, nine hours before.

What have I done?

BUT I'VE BEEN going on and on, she says. Now it's your turn.

In the seat beside her, he shifts in silence.

You promised.

He stares blankly at her, as though her request has shaken him from the security of a distant memory.

Like just now, she says. While I was talking. Tell me what you were thinking while I was telling my story. Telling it, I might add, with such flair. My presence alone holds the attention of one hundred men, William John Wills, but not yours. Why is that?

He blushes.

I'll forgive you this time, she says. But I want you to talk to me. I want to know everything.

It was nothing, really, he says. I'm sorry for —

No, Julia says. Don't apologise. Tell me what you were thinking. Just then. Tell me a story.

I don't know if there is a story.

There's always a story. You just have to believe it. Now go ahead. Give it a try.

I was s-seven, he begins.

Seven! A story about little William?

No, no. Again he blushes. I was s-seventeen.

That's nearly my age, she says. Yes, this is good. We have a beginning. Tell me a story about yourself when you were nearly my age. She touches his forearm, the back of her bare hand gliding over the coarse material of his jacket.

After that first performance, Thomas took William and their father to dinner. Halfway through the meal, all talk in the restaurant hushed. Still chewing, William looked up

just in time to see her walk through the doorway. The actress from earlier in the night. The same woman from that encounter in Sydney, two days after his arrival. She walked to the table beside them, William nearly choking on his steak as the chair was pulled away for her and the applause receded. This time there was no collision of bodies, though in that moment he wanted nothing more than to walk over to her, to touch her once again so that he could determine if she were real.

Since that night, Wills has seen her perform four times. Each evening before the show, he leaves his father in the tent, offers no explanation. After the performance, she releases tales from her life, anecdotes he thinks of in the tent, while standing before a patient — those times when his mind should be clean and quick and not rattled by Julia Matthews.

Four days after Thomas led him back into her life, he begins his story.

This was in London.

I like the beginning, she says. Go on.

I had gone there alone. On the weekends, a few hours before dusk, I would walk down to watch as people attempted to navigate the maze at Hampton Court. I would stand at the entrance and —

What did it look like? she asks. You have to help me visualise this, William. For instance, what colour do you see, now, looking back, when you think of Hampton Court?

He thinks for a moment, tightens his eyes. Green, he says.

Everything is green.

Green like my eyes? Her hand slides to his inner elbow.

Yes. Or at least green like one of your eyes. Have you forgotten about the other one, Julia? In embarrassment — he did not mean to be so bold — he pulls away, but

she moves with him, their limbs linked.

It's fine, she says. You're doing fine. You were telling me about my eyes. That is, you were telling me about the green at Hampton Court.

He gathers the confidence to look at her once again. Yes, Julia. Green like your eyes, or at least green like the left one.

That was a good answer, William. What else do you see? What do you hear?

Men and women stroll through the gardens. They applaud those who step from the maze's exit. They clap even for those who were forced to turn back, the maze too intricate for most. These were brief celebrations of failure. For the first few days, I watched, nothing more. Some people took it less seriously than others. This I could not forgive.

I can picture you there, she says. You would stand with your hands clasped behind your back, sizing up the contestants. But that's not how you thought of them, not as contestants. This was no game for you. You had a moustache but no beard.

His hand moves carelessly to his face. How did you know?

Oh, I know these things. Where did we leave off?

There was a man seated each day at the exit. Not knowing his title, I will call him the Maze Guard.

I like that, she says. The Maze Guard.

He would record the names of all those who walked through with success. He sat at this small wooden desk, the ledger open before him. One day I asked if I could see what he had written. I was less interested in names than in times. I wanted to know who made it through fastest. On the top of the page was a date written with a careful hand, as though he were recording all of this information for the Queen.

Beneath the date were no names. Thin rain was all it had taken to keep people

away.

Have you given it a go? the guard asked me.

I shook my head.

Then don't you think it's about time you tested yourself?

I like the way you did that, Julia interrupts.

Did what?

The way you gave the guard a cockney accent.

I guess I wasn't thinking.

Well it was good. And I should know. I'm the greatest actress you've ever seen,
William John Wills.

She leans closer, kisses him on the cheek. She presses her nose to his nose like the
rite of a desert tribe he could live among but never understand.

What will we do, William?

We're going to finish telling this story, he says, attempting a laugh, but his words,
he knows, even as he speaks them, will not be enough to bring her back to Hampton
Court. For the next hour, they do not speak. Julia sits beside him, her warmth a
formula his books have failed to teach him, one he will try to decipher in the morning,
and during this hour he will think through his story, of all the things he has never told
her and never will, the ten minutes that it took him to pass from entry to exit — *nine
minutes and forty-three seconds*, he thinks — of the maze whose hedges had not been
the green of Julia Matthews's left eye but, from now on, will remain that way in his
memory.

There can be no going back to the rhythms of life before her, he knows. The work
would be gone, desire shifted elsewhere, his longing for the desert sea replaced by this
woman, a girl from whom he could have everything, or so she informed him on that

night when she told him to close his eyes and choose a hand and she had revealed a white kid leather glove (left hand) and told him that he could be the one to possess her as no one had before. And for a moment, there, alone with her in the dressing room inside a theatre in Ballarat, Julia's head on his shoulder, he thinks that it might be possible to have both, this world and the other, whose untrod landscape gives him reason for waking as she never has, though she is here, the landscape nothing more than a dream, and he cannot stop his hand from travelling to her neck, downward to her collarbone, inspecting her skin like a specimen he has discovered in this new country, freckles like constellations by which he could chart his life, and before he knows it his finger touches one freckle, traces a path to the next, then another, her chest rising, falling, rising beneath his hand in this room that has become, to him, more real than any inland sea, and in his ear she imparts the word he hears her say on stage each night, *Yes*, though this time it is no question.

BRAHE STANDS AT the window. For several moments, he stares outside into the world from which he has come, the world in which his story has yet to end. He returns to the table, the five others waiting.

Mid-December. A month before, we agreed that things could get no worse. Heat and flies. Dust. Ask any of those men what composed their lives and that is how they will respond: *heat and flies, dust*. After a while, you stop worrying about the flies. Better to save your strength. Better to think that a time will come when you will need strength for something, anything, else. Early on, you learn there is nothing you can do about the heat and dust.

In the desert, you take shallow breaths. With that intensity of dry heat comes a tightening of the chest. We soothed our bodies by concentrating on the rhythms of our breathing. It was like starting over, and in our rebirth we altered the methods by which our lungs accepted air. In this way, we would talk late into the night, waiting for the coolest hours to relax.

In the desert, you begin to fear common things. Everyday sounds and smells become unfamiliar. A bird's screech, the sign of ambush. A dry creek bed, the worst of omens. Give a man in the desert a rock or stick and tell him that it is a religion, and he will believe that he has been saved. Show another man the skin of a snake, and he will prepare for his funeral.

Under different circumstances, your better judgement would identify the absurdity of such beliefs. But stepping into this exploring party, simply signing our names to the contract, was enough for most of us to change our perception of the smallest things. We spend our lives listening to tales of journey and transformation. Tales of the chosen and the exiled, the conquerors and the defeated. Shouldn't we expect that, in

this way, one learns to live?

Leichhardt. There was always Leichhardt. His name entered our thoughts each time we looked into the horizon. Some people see limitless possibility in that expanse. Others, a sense of disproportion, the flora, what little there is of it, melting into the all-consuming landscape. It will take you in, that landscape. If you are lucky, it will open before you and spread itself out, an ocean of land offering its secrets and showing enough kindness to release you before it consumes you whole. In our party, there were men of both minds, those who believed the desert would serve one role or the other. I no longer remember which category I belonged to, though one's position on these matters changes from day to day.

At this temperature, someone, probably Charley Gray, said that lungs can burn to ash. You can live three days with burnt lungs and then you die. No one had ever heard of such a case — *burnt lungs?* — but in the desert you respect all fears.

Later, there was talk of brain melt. Our blacksmith, Patten, said this disease was more common in the north-eastern region of the continent but had been known to strike in the centre with no less severity. I asked him if this is what happened to Leichhardt. No one spoke for the rest of the evening. Then, shortly after breakfast the next day, Charley Gray began to complain of a headache. Standing, he pushed Landells aside and pointed to his forehead. Feel my head, he said. Is it swelling? It is swelling! With both hands he grabbed the top of his skull and ran towards the creek, screaming all the while that he must wet his head before it melted.

It was the first time we laughed in weeks.

That laughter held steady for several hours. We sat around the fire, each of us complaining of similar troubles. No one could keep a straight face. The joke was finished, unwound like a ball of string for which we no longer had any use. All talk of

maladies remained unspoken from then on.

I can only imagine how absurd all of this must sound to you, but you were not there. To understand, you would have had to walk with us, to bet on the time it would take our party to reach the tree in the distance, a hanging rock, and then to have forgotten the wager long before we arrived because forgetting was the only way for most of us to go on.

Leichhardt. What were we supposed to make of Leichhardt? There were those who believed that he was still out there, wandering around, waiting for the day he will be called from the belly of the continent to rule some wandering tribe, perhaps our own. Given our circumstances, that theory was much more comforting than the others. Those stories of suffering and madness. The ones that said Leichhardt underwent the most severe of deaths. That he would have been fortunate if the natives killed him, his body consumed by hungry men or offered to the flames. Another version insisted that the desert heat penetrates the skin, turns bone to dust. Leichhardt and his party, returned to the earth, scattered across the continent like seed.

But you do not want to hear me talk about Leichhardt. You want to hear about Burke. It is Burke whom you want me to raise, fully formed, from the ruins of this story.

There was another time. One final meeting between the two of us before I set out, ever so briefly, with the new party — Burke, Wills, Gray and King. All of this happened after Wills came into my tent and, with a handshake and false smile, cast himself off with those other men to a place far from Eden.

Strange that I cannot remember all of the details. Remembering, you see, has been my greatest burden. Perhaps this is why I find it so easy to speak to you now, as though releasing these sins will be the first stage of my absolution. Or perhaps Burke

and the three others have already joined Leichhardt and none of this matters.

For weeks, all I could recall about those last days were fleeting images and sounds, the smell of tea and fire, camel dung. It all comes back to me now, that period of stillness, everything comes back. In the days I spent walking to find you, I have been unable to sleep. I have learned the true meaning of those stories of saints who wander through the desert without food or water. Prophets do not choose their prophecy. And so here I am, left with nothing but lurid nightmares that offer no chance of escaping what I have been saved from and which I now must live to tell. They are all — *Burke* is all — I have left. I no longer fear him as I did for the first weeks of his absence. What I fear now is the inability to forget, this curse that he and the others brought upon me in their time of dying. If they are dead. If they have been lucky enough to die alone, without the interference of other hands.

Did their lungs turn to ash as Charley Gray warned? Did their brains ooze from their ears and noses? Did the natives come for them in the night, while they were sleeping, or, even worse, when they were approaching the farthest north, too dazed by the sun to care? And then, the questions that are worst of all: Did they curse me as they died? Would you?

You were talking about your last meeting with Burke.

Was I?

You said that you returned with Burke to the creek.

Did I?

The sun was setting. The sky lit up like a glowing coal. He handed me a thin leather satchel. I had never seen it before.

Hold on to this for me, he said. Allow no one to open it, Brahe. No one. He put his

hand on the back of my neck and made me look directly at him.

You have no idea how much you can trust me, I wanted to say, but all I could do was nod.

Wait here for three months, he said. Wright will arrive within a fortnight. Within a month, at most. If your supplies run out before the three months are up, send two men for refurbishments. If we haven't returned by then ... If three months have passed and ... Take everything back to Menindee. Send a telegram to the Committee. Tell them what has happened. He looked around, gesturing to the creek below, the camp in the distance. Whatever you do, he said, leave this god-awful place.

He stared into the middle distance. Are you clear about what I am asking, Brahe?

I lowered my head. It was enough movement for him to think that I agreed to everything.

Then that is all, he said.

That, then, *was* all. A leather satchel and instructions to leave the camp if time ran out. There was no discussion of a reconnaissance party, nothing else.

We headed back to the camp. Several native children crouched behind the scrub on the opposite side of the creek.

There's one more thing, Burke said. If I don't return, I want you to toss that entire satchel into the creek. I don't care what you do. Just get rid of everything. From now on, you will have to look out for the others. All of this, he said, motioning towards the camp, will be your responsibility.

I will do everything I can, I said.

There was one last thing, though I can no longer tell whether he spoke these words or if, much later, I put them in his mouth.

Brahe looks away from the other men at the table. After several moments, he resumes speaking, this time in a different voice, one that cracks as each word passes through his lips.

You will have to make unenviable decisions, Brahe. Those decisions may include leaving us to save the others. I know that you will do what is right. That is why I have chosen you. Leave us to save the others.

Those were his last words to me. They are the last things I remember, though I can no longer be certain whether he spoke them or if I have imagined them. Other things I can still recall, instructions and observations he made several days later, that morning when we sat around the fire, eating in silence, before I left them and rode back alone to my new post.

After all of this time, his eyes are what remain with me. Those pale eyes that women would talk about, even those who never met him. All I can imagine is that he died with those eyes wide open. Unblinking eyes that will remain fixed on my movements and infiltrate my thoughts until the end of time. If all of this is true, if it is how I imagine it, then my sentence cannot come soon enough.

What, then? What came afterwards? Afterwards?

It hadn't rained in weeks. This is what they were heading into. Such uncertainty. Burke's plans were to leave in two days. We spent that time jerking meat and inspecting the supplies that the smaller party would carry to the Gulf. There was little talk around the camp. We went through this business with unprecedented order. Odd the efficiency that such circumstances elicit, but I knew that this concentration was helping to numb us against what lay ahead, when we looked across the campfire and saw absence where once there were friends.

Strange that I can remember, with disturbing precision, the smallest details. The rips in Burke's clothes which King mended as he sat before the fire. King's silence, his gaze still drowning in the memory of some bloodstained Indian battlefield that held him and would not let him go. Charley Gray talking, always talking, about the blue waters of the Gulf. And Wills, riding sideways on his camel so that he could record his observations without hindering our progress. His tiny scrawl filling notebook after notebook with the evidence of our lives.

If I concentrate, I can still hear the gentle clang of his instruments. We had laughed about that sound, the rest of us. How lucky Wills was, Charley Gray said one night while the surveyor was out of earshot. A man so happy to fondle his instruments will never need a woman.

We all knew those sounds. They became the concert of our movements. The tender snap of the box being shut at day's end. When his observations had gone well, there was a light tap, the gentle patter of a woman's heel against a wooden floor. Otherwise, the ritual closing of boxes sounded deficient, a drunkard slamming his empty mug against the bar. That sound could bring the roughest of us to the verge of tears. The gentle tap, on the other hand, provided comfort in this strange era we stumbled into and which Wills was prepared to cultivate with his knowledge and manners.

I became so accustomed to those sounds that I thought nothing of it when, the morning of the new party's departure, I heard the opening and shutting of those cases. I looked up from my cot to see him, William Wills, kneeling on the ground, instruments and notebooks laid out before him like an altar. Later that day, I wanted to say something about what had passed between us. I didn't speak. Do you understand? I didn't speak.

Why was he there? Do you know why he came back to your tent?

Yes.

Was it as you thought?

Yes.

What happened that morning? Did Wills return to your tent? What are you trying to say?

I am half asleep, watching as he unpacks his beloved possessions. Barometers, thermometers, two bundles of journals. One by one, he lays them across the floor. I rub my eyes in an attempt to distinguish memory from truth. This was the second time in a week that he woke me, and my first thoughts were that I was caught inside the other moment.

What is it, William? I asked.

He continued to unpack.

What are you doing?

He stood and, approaching me, said, I need you to take care of these things. Watch after them. Then, after a long pause: Until I return. Until we return.

He didn't wait for a response. Before I realised what he was asking of me, he said, I know about Mr Burke's instructions.

I nodded.

With both hands, he grabbed my shoulders. Listen to me, Brahe. I need you to promise that you will wait an extra month. If necessary. Watch after these things. Of all people, I know that you understand this, Brahe. Just one more month, Brahe ...

Howitt senses that there is more, something else Brahe wants to say but which he cannot bring himself to draw out into this room that rests on the edge of the Loddon

River, so far from the wreckage of which he speaks.

After several moments of silence, Howitt says, You must tell me everything. What did Wills say to you that morning?

Brahe looks towards the window as though expecting to find some other reflection staring back at him.

What? Howitt asks. What did he say before he left?

God save us. God save us all.

An hour later, we lined up beside the river. Burke paced back and forth, pausing for a moment in front of each man who would remain at the base camp, offering words of encouragement. There was no grand speech. No theatre, as there had been on the day we departed from the city, when he stood before politicians and journalists and women whose smiles kept us warm through the first nights. The performance was over. This was the beginning of some new rehearsal, but for now we were Burke's only audience, and he had long ago stopped caring about whether his words astonished us.

We started in ignorant arrogance, clothes snug against our bellies, and ended — if that day marked the end — as stooped figures, meek followers. It is this type of simplicity that the desert teaches. Some of us were faster learners than others. I do not speak here of man against nature, of submission before a greater power. Nor do I speak of the man who goes out into the wild so that he may face his fears and confront the beast.

I wonder how you will react to that sparseness. I wonder what you will make of yourself when all that lingers is silence, empty space. It is no wonder that Jesus chose the desert for his period of fasting. If a man cannot face himself in that place and see at last the nakedness of his desires, then he has nothing worth confronting. There is

nothing left inside of him. He has not prepared himself to live in this world and has no place in it.

What did he say to you that day? Howitt asks. What are you trying to tell us?

Brahe turns away.

There were five of us that first day, six camels, one horse. The animals were loaded with provisions that would last, at most, three months. If those provisions were rationed properly. They say the return always passes more quickly, with greater ease, than the voyage out. This is usually offered as common knowledge. Anyone who has walked along an unfamiliar street knows that the discoveries, however minor they may be, eat away time. Time is memory. Memory ages us.

As we walked farther from the camp on Cooper's Creek, I kept my eyes on Wills. The longer I watched him, the more I began to understand his final words to me that morning in the tent. Whether he truly spoke them or they were merely a dream no longer mattered.

William John Wills. To see a man in his prime in such discontent. Twenty-six years old, his quiet confidence the perfect balance to Burke's brazenness. That day, you never could have imagined that only several hours earlier he had appeared before me, his body trembling, his mind for the first time ... *unkempt*.

I beg you to wait one more month. Please. One more month. Good God, Brahe, one more month.

Was that all?

Yes.

What happened next?

He left. They all left.

I had breakfast with them that last morning. The final breaking of bread. Our mood had grown more sombre each time we moved on. From Royal Park ... Menindee ... Cooper's Creek. Now here. I take this to be nothing more than the security we find in what is familiar. The sense of ourselves that we lose when we leave one place behind. But this time, leaving was different. The four of them were crossing a divide that never should have been crossed.

While the others prepared the animals for departure, Burke pulled me aside. He repeated his instructions. I should catch up with him to convey a message if Wright returned sooner than expected. I should destroy his satchel if anything happened. It was as though he finally understood the consequences of his decision.

In the distance, standing beside one of the camels, I could see Wills. When Burke left, I walked over to him, but he scurried away, out of earshot, his back to me. That was the last time I saw him. The last time I saw any of them.

What did you do from there?

I walked back to the camp. The waiting, the silence. My inaction. My only function from the moment I left them has been to count the days, awaiting their return and the homecoming that, even then, as I watched their bodies bleed into the horizon, I knew would never come. Still, I would trade everything to have gone with them. To be the one to disappear, to have disappeared. To have known what they knew in those final weeks.

Instead, I did nothing. I have done nothing. I have walked to find you, and now I have told you all that I know. They walked away. I let them.

Brahe turns from the five men at the table. Outside, a thin rain has begun to fall. He walks to the window.

Let it come down, he says. Let it all come down.

Chapter 5: The Measure of Time

HE WAKES TO the warmth of the woman's touch. For some time she has been beside him, wading in the shallows of his dream. Her callused hands knead his flesh, her whispers replace the sound of Gray's moans. King watches as she strokes his inner ankle with the back of her fingers, her gentle murmur like a prayer. She measures the differences of their flesh, likeness upon likeness, the disparity of her black hands, his pale legs.

In India, he knew the pleasure of similar caresses. He has pleaded for them ever since, the pulse of a woman's neck against his palm, tongue to hipbone. On her knees, she moves towards him. Shadow falls like lace over their bodies.

He raises himself onto his elbows. He wants her to tell him that this is not another one of the dreams that has left him trembling through the nights. With her thumb and first finger, she encircles his right ankle, the one that is neither purple nor swollen to twice its normal size. Her hands move upward, onto his thighs. A light brush, and the heavy blanket parts. His hairless body now exposed, nearly feminine in the moonlight.

Her hands are warm, her palms chafed. She has nearly reached his groin when the humming begins: deep notes without variation, moans that are not quite moans, nothing at all like those sounds Charley Gray made in his final hours.

His eyes move to her hands, across her face, her heavy breasts. This she does not see, her eyes now closed. The hint of song rises, trails off. From the other side of that song come footsteps, whispers. The gentle working of her hands, her voice: all of it ceases at once. She falls away from him. Together they peer into the darkness in search of the person who has interrupted her endeavour, her first thought to scold

whoever has put an end to her inspection, this slow healing of the white man.

AROUND THE TWENTY tons of equipment scurry eighteen men. One stands motionless in the centre. His face is red, his voice hoarse, and, though the day has just begun, he has already sacked two members of the party for disobedience. Short two men and the expedition has yet to depart.

Six wagons, twenty-three horses. The camels, those creatures the public has begun to call *ships of the desert*, are the focus for the spectators who gather around the chaos in Royal Park at noon on this cold day to see the Exploring Expedition set off. Each camel has special shoes, thin layers of leather shod with iron, for travel over stony ground. There are bags that the sepoy can fill with air and tie beneath the camels' jowls for crossing deep streams. There is one hospital camel whose head sinks dejectedly. This animal has been fitted with an enclosed stretcher made of canvas, its wooden planks rolled together to save space.

Each man carries a pocket charcoal filter to obtain drinkable water. Inside the crates, a large Union Jack, neatly folded; a blue light stored inside a lined case; three rockets, should anyone get lost and, should those rockets fail, a Chinese gong tied to the rear of the third wagon.

Slightly off the park grounds and to the east, behind the camel stables and hidden from view, a portable grog shop opens. The rumour of its presence. Men move in and out of the crowd, sniffing their way behind the trees and to the makeshift bar. One by one, they come and go with devilish grins, eyes focused on the unsteady earth.

It isn't long before whispers of its offerings reach Owen Cowan. He is bent over two cases of salted meat when he hears the news, smells it wafting off

two men who walk past. Cowan leaves his business unfinished, unattended. Makes his way behind the stables, beyond the band that has formed and whose clamour has added to his leader's fury.

Burke can already see the problem. Everything has been accounted for. But now that these supplies are all in one place, he wonders whether there will be enough room to store them all. He walks among his men, repeats orders, shouts them (always shouts them) not for the sake of clarity but to demonstrate to the assembled crowd the authority that comes with his position.

He is beside one of the camels, face turned to avoid the smell, when he sees Cowan stumble out from behind the trees. Nearby spectators break into laughter.

You! Burke shouts, and he is surprised — disappointed — by the identity of the man who, lying prostrate, returns his gaze with a guilty grin. It is the ex-policeman. Perhaps if Cowan chose to make such a fool out of both of them in private, far from the swelling crowd, Burke could forgive his drunken state. Tell him to go home and sleep it off. Catch up with us tomorrow. It would be like this never happened. But the spectators assemble, and he has no choice.

He senses their growing impatience. They want to see how a true leader acts. Well, then. He will show them. With his right boot, Burke nudges Cowan to his feet. When they are face to face, he slaps Cowan once, twice across the cheek, all the while wondering how much will be enough. What will it take for them to sense his anger, his authority, to understand that he is unwilling to tolerate insubordination? Before he knows it, he is pointing (in which direction, he is unsure, the important thing for the crowd to see is that he is dismissing this man), and Cowan creeps away.

On his way back to the patch of tents and animals and wagons, three

journalists approach.

What is delaying the party's departure?

Yes. Why haven't you left yet?

Tell me, Mr Burke, now that you have reached this point, what are you thinking?

He takes time to answer their questions. The journey ahead is long, he says, weighing his words. We must remain patient, circumspect, for our endeavour to prove triumphant.

For another minute, he talks, each man scribbling notes, their nods like punctuation to his statements. The journalists thank him for his time. They wish him success.

If I may, Burke says, I would like to ask you a question.

The three journalists wait.

How many people do you think have turned out today?

Oh, 10,000.

More, says another.

How many more? Burke asks.

Thousands more, one says, before turning to the colleague at his right. Wouldn't you say?

Yes. Thousands.

Inside a tent sits William John Wills. He cleans his surveying instruments, polishes them as though they will soon be displayed in a museum. He wants to spend these final moments alone with his implements, this catalogue of his life. Sextant, compass, theodolite, chronometer, barometer, telescope, thermometer, anemometer, nautical almanacs, telescope, empty sketchbooks and journals, specimen jars, bottles filled

with preserving fluids. He places the instruments inside custom-built mahogany boxes, closes the lids, opens them.

A ruffling of the canvas flap of his tent. Wills looks up.

There's a man outside from *The Argus* wants to interview you.

Moments later, further ruffling.

We need you for the group portrait.

Here we are. Thirteen in the photograph. Missing are Fletcher, Creber and Cowan, each discharged before the photographer arranged his camera, as well as Lane, Brooks, McIlwaine and Wright, four of the eight hired after our departure. Also missing is our surveyor and third in command, William John Wills, who said that he had no time for interruptions such as this.

Royal Park. Melbourne. August 20th, 1860. The camera's flash inside the rush of crowd and music.

In the centre stands Burke. Left hand in pocket, right leg out-thrust. A pose that, we would soon learn, he would affect before addressing a group. Here he is, alive inside the image, his voice already hoarse. A voice that he strained as soon as it became clear that packing all of the equipment would take longer than he expected and that from here on we would have difficulty moving it. A voice at once tender and harsh that for the remainder of his life would not return to its full command, or so we imagine, those of us who were not with him in the end.

To his right stands a crowd of well-dressed men and women, several children. Behind them rises one of the wagons. Later, just north of Swan Hill, we abandoned that very wagon. Walked away from it with the same indifference we would if leaving an empty plate on the dinner table.

Some things were no longer in our hands. We inhabited a separate world whose every detail had been scrutinised, mulled over by men whose boots were acquainted with city streets and little else. Yet everything beyond the wagon, all that lay on the far side of the eucalypts that serve as a backdrop for this photograph, was outside of our control and theirs, unknown, unknowable. Who among us, now, all these years later, can blame those who abandoned the party as we abandoned that wagon?

Other things in the faded photograph have gone missing, as well. Faces and limbs. An entire horse has vanished, several bodies. Whole lives wiped from view, no longer accountable to history's gaze.

For some time, there had been talk of a group portrait. Between the loading of crates and tents, whispers of a grand speech, women blowing kisses into the crisp winter air before the band marched alongside us, easing our passage out of Royal Park.

This is the only photograph that survives from that day. Beyond this, only memory and all of the tricks it has come to play on our history.

Standing above the wagon, you will find Charley Gray. Throughout what Burke would later call the *unforeseen difficulties of packing*, Gray said that he had something planned. We all knew Charley Gray. Even those among us who had not yet spoken to him, or heard him speak — for with Charley Gray, one listened — even those of us knew him. He had been a sailor. He had spent most of his twenty-four years on the open seas and in that time he learned to attract attention.

Just you wait and see, he said, a nail in his mouth. A nail? There was always something in Charley Gray's mouth. He said that he would find the best angle to view the proceedings. He also said that it was important to provide the ladies in attendance with an opportunity to see him, dashing explorer that he was, before he became so

famous that none of them could ever get close to him again. A last chance, as it were, before the start of our new lives.

We thought we would be gone for ten months, at most a year. Besides this, other rumours persisted.

Wills in his tent, speaking to a reporter.

They say you don't expect to return with the party.

I would never leave the party.

Then why do they say you won't be back in six months?

Six months? Who said six months?

The reporter checks his notes. Let's see here. Yes, I thought so. It was Robert O'Hara Burke himself who said six months. He holds his notes out for Wills to inspect.

Let me see that. Wills reads the newspaperman's interview with Burke and shakes his head.

Well, if not six months, how long do you expect the Exploring Party will be gone?

Wills looking through him, thinking.

We can imagine this, all that we will never know. We must. We know the way Wills looked at the newspaperman, there in the tent, before this photograph was taken, because it was the way he looked at all of us. Looked into us. It was for that look that we were ready to trust him with our lives.

The newspaperman continues: I asked, How long do you think the Exploring Party will be gone, Dr Wills?

I am not a doctor.

It says here —

You're referring to my father. I am not a doctor.

Well. How long do you think the Exploring Party will be gone, Mr Wills?

I expect to see Melbourne again at this time —

At this time next year?

At this time in two years.

The disappointment on the newspaperman's face as he writes in his journal.

What we have here is an albumen silver photograph. 18.2 x 28.0 cm. On either side of Burke stand two groups. They face one another like war parties. To Burke's right are members of the Committee and other dignitaries. Mr Stawell in his top hat wishing us luck. *I know that you will make the Committee proud.* To Burke's left, mixed with other well-wishers, the party itself, ragged after packing, ragged before the first day has begun in full. Absent are the brewers of grog and prostitutes who descended upon the park to offer their services. They came, as did the band, without our knowledge and to Burke's delight and anger, two poles that in his world were positioned in close proximity.

In the distance rise tall eucalypts. They stand wide apart. In the beginning, we could ride two wagons side by side between trees. With the first rains came slick earth, the camels sliding this way and that. Then, after several days, the trees closed in on one another. In certain parts, a single wagon could no longer pass without the aid of axe and sweat. That was only the beginning. Things got worse and worse until they became unspeakable.

Is that why you asked to see this photograph?

What you have here is an albumen silver photograph. 18.2 x

28.0 cm. In it we are preserved for the record before we fell outside of history.

AFTER THE DELAYS, they move north, six miles beneath low clouds. What strikes Burke most after the raucousness of their departure is the silence. So, he thinks. This is how it will be.

In the fading light of Essendon, crowds line the streets to watch the column of explorers, already slumped and tattered, progress through town.

For the most part, the townspeople stand clear. They ogle the camels, peculiar creatures whose eyes meet theirs unlike any animal they have ever seen. Then, through the crowd, breaks a handful of children who run alongside the explorers, raising in their tight fists wedges of bread, small bundles of sugar. While the men enjoy this treatment, Burke remains in the front, indifferent to the attention. His mind is elsewhere and soon he will be, too — far from here, back in Melbourne, at the Princess Theatre, where Julia Matthews will take the stage later tonight.

He knows this cannot go on forever. Soon, the expedition will be too far from the city to permit his return. More than anything, he needs certainty. In order to go on, certainty that she is with him, her mind, first, her body to follow. He has told her that he will carry her words and slightest touch to the Gulf. He has told her that he is going to the edge of time. For that, he has said, one wants *more*. Will she at last answer his question and end this misery of waiting?

Hand in jacket pocket, he massages his gift throughout the evening, a miniature portrait of himself that he will ask her to place on her bedside table. The more famous she becomes, the tighter her mother's control over her time outside the theatre. But he has noticed a slow warming in the woman, a tinge of pink in her cheeks when she sees

him before and after these shows at the Princess Theatre. Slowly, she has begun to accept that his affection for her daughter is unwavering. Besides, it is not entirely unpleasant to consort with someone in such a prestigious position as this Robert O'Hara Burke has lately found himself. To have been chosen, Mrs Matthews thinks, means he must be worth choosing. From police inspector to leader of the Victorian Exploring Expedition in one dashing move. Not such a bad man for Julia to associate with after all.

This time, Mrs Matthews leaves them alone after the show. How things have changed, he thinks, as she closes the dressing-room door when she exits. Julia walks across the room to embrace him.

Do you have a fever? he asks. Anything to touch her. He presses the back of his hand against her forehead.

I'm just happy that you are finally here. I saw you walk in, late. You missed my first song. I was worried that something had gone wrong.

Before he knows it, he is on his knee.

She places her hand to her mouth, giggles. What are you doing down there? Come back to me. I want you here, she says. On your feet, Inspector!

He cannot resist the order. From his pocket, he removes the portrait, concealing it for a moment inside his large hands.

What have you got there, Mr Burke? she asks.

Robert, he says.

Ah, yes. Now I remember. Again, her laugh. He has convinced himself that he can taste it. What are you hiding from me, *Robert*?

I have something for you. A small gift. I don't want you to forget me while I am away.

She lowers her head, provides him with a better view of her pouting lips, the shadows that fall across her cheeks. How could I forget you? she asks. You are here every night. She prolongs her look of annoyance, then flashes a smile. Do I get to have my present anyway?

He lays the portrait on her lap, an excuse to brush that region of her body he considers less obtainable than the Gulf itself.

Perhaps she has been expecting jewellery, a ring. Perhaps this is why she does not speak after he reveals the gift. She cups her hands over her nose and mouth, and though he attempts to define her expression, she offers no clue to her thoughts.

Moving her hands away, she says, I will treasure this. I will look at it and wonder where you are, what you are discovering. I will wonder whether you are thinking of me.

I will always be thinking of you.

Her eyes move from the portrait to his face. That, she says, is exactly what I want to hear.

An hour later, they emerge onto the street and stroll, arms locked, to her hotel. As expected, her mother waits for them in the lobby. To Burke's surprise, she doesn't ask him to leave. Instead, they talk into the small hours of the night, the three of them sitting on plush furniture, sipping tea. When Mrs Matthews excuses herself and goes upstairs to bed, he moves beside Julia.

All these months away, he says. The thought of not seeing you. I don't know whether I can bear it.

Julia smiles. We will be together, she says. I have your portrait.

Yes, but ...

What is it?

You haven't given anything to me.

Are you saying that memories won't be enough?

If you do not have an answer, then I would like a little something that I can carry with me. I want to be able to pull you from my pocket when no one is looking.

I may be petite, Robert, but I won't fit inside your pocket. Again, she giggles, a crinkle at the bridge of her nose.

Will you remember me? Will you remember to think of me each night before you go to bed?

She nods. And each morning when I wake. Suddenly, she rises, the withdrawal of her body like an amputation. Wait here, she says.

Into the long hallway, she dissolves, the faint patter of her footsteps against the wooden floor. Several minutes pass before she re-emerges, swaying from side to side, hands behind her back as though she is skating.

I had to take off my shoes. Eyes raised, she lifts the hem of her dress. See? What do you think? She begins to dance, kicking her legs higher, higher, curling her toes. He has seen her playfulness on stage, but none of it compares with this. She is all laughter and awkward motions one moment and then languid, serious the next. The steps are not unlike that first dance he saw her perform in Beechworth, though this time she offers no attempt to conceal her shapeliness. He has named parts of her body to coincide with the landscape of his childhood, claiming her as a piece of the story he recites over and over to himself. But in the morning, after his success had seemed entirely secure, he always wakes to the recognition of her resistance.

Whether because of her mother or her own free spirit, which she displays for him here, in this lobby where anyone could walk in and see them — see him in this world

that is miles from where he should be — she remains unwilling to be claimed.

What have you found for me? he asks.

Hands clasped behind her back, she shrugs. Pick one.

He remembers the game, knows its rules require that you cannot succeed on the first try.

Go on. What are you waiting for?

He places his hand on her right forearm.

She shakes her head. No. One syllable that rises to accommodate a second, a third, and from behind her back Julia offers an empty palm, followed by a derisive smile. Before she withdraws her hand, Burke grabs it.

Do I get another try? he asks.

That depends. Have you been good?

I am always good with you.

She raises her eyes to the ceiling. Yes, fine. I will give you one more chance. But you have to promise to be good.

To be good?

Yes. That's exactly what I said, Inspector. This last word she pronounces as though imitating a repeat offender. Can you make that promise to me?

Which one?

To be good. Now concentrate. This is serious.

I promise.

With her free hand, she covers his mouth, then his eyes. Keep them closed, she says as she pulls away. All right. Go ahead.

He extends his left hand, lets it graze against her waist for a moment before shaking his head. No, he says, you've already fooled

me once, Julia Matthews.

Now why would I do a thing like that?

That's what I'd like to know!

Trying the other side, he begins at her elbow and works his way inside the crease between her ribs and elbow, which divide at his touch. His arm, extended as though he is preparing to shake hands with her, slides over the slope of her right breast, northward to her neck. There he stops. With his other hand, he touches her lower back, his single hand enough to lift and carry her away. She moves into him, her knees between his knees.

At this moment, he opens his eyes. He expects to hear her cry foul, to claim that he has broken his promise, cheated. Instead, he finds Julia's eyes closed, mouth half open, though silent, the rules of the game suddenly altered. The moisture of her lips in the candlelight. A hint of her small white teeth. He leans back to take in her form, only to see that the hands which previously concealed his gift have fallen limply to her side. In one of those hands, he glimpses the prize: fingers of a kid glove (white, right hand).

He places his other hand on her lower back, fingertips nearly joined around her waist.

Come closer, he says. Eyes still closed, she bites her lip. Closer. She lets him guide her onto the couch. Now that's better, he says. Keep your eyes closed.

He has come to worship her voice, its unexpected inflections, always different, as though she is constantly auditioning for a new role. Never before has he heard her maintain silence for so long. He could stay this way, with her as she is now, and never speak again, but there are words, final words, which he cannot avoid.

I must leave soon, he says.

Don't say it.

If you cannot answer me now, Julia, then I will wait. I will wait until I return. And when I do return, six months from now, I will ask you again. But for now, I must go.

Don't say it.

The kid glove slides from her hand, onto his knees, down his leg and to the floor. As happy as he is at this moment with her pressed against him — happier, perhaps, than he has ever been — he thinks not of Julia Matthews but instead of the glove.

BEFORE FIRST LIGHT, the two boys are out of their beds and on their way. They walk barefoot along the muddy track, trading stories about what they saw the day before. They discuss equipment, the chain of command, the length of each man's pistol, which, as far as they understand, denotes the very chain in question. Inside their excitement emerge small pockets of disappointment. Though not old enough to ride off with these gallant men now, they make a promise to act with dignity when their time comes.

They are halfway to the explorers' camp when the clippety-clop of distant galloping reaches them. The boys step aside to make room, fearful that they will miss a detail.

Through thin trees and across the slope of flat earth, they see him approach. The lone rider rises out of the morning mist. Even from this vantage, they can distinguish him from the others. His spotted horse. The thick brown hair and beard that flows in the wind. It is the Irishman. Yesterday, they watched as he rushed back and forth through the disordered camp, his voice caught between anger and fear, that level of speech schoolboys learn to recognise from their teachers' frequent confrontation with

troublemakers who have outgrown clothes and desk.

They move aside to watch him pass. All boyish grins, arms extended in near salute, but he passes without looking. His eyes are closed, and to his mouth he presses a white glove.

It will be hard enough to convince people of the first part — the leader riding sightless at dawn, as though preparing for the carnival — but what about the second? The lady's glove, which the Irishman holds to his mouth like a remedy.

The boys turn to one another to confirm what they have seen. They think of how to confront the strange vision, but whatever they might say will be brushed aside by friends, parents. They are merely children, after all, and how many times have they been told to stop telling stories?

FOR FIVE DAYS, rain.

We are learning to measure time in new ways. A wagon wheel sinks in the black soil, and we work to dig it free. A rope loosens, unknots itself. We watch helplessly as a bundle of equipment slithers off a camel's back. Wills or Becker dismounts to collect a sample. The whole party stops. Each case is different yet always the same. The Irishman rides impatiently along the length of men to see what has happened, but no one will make eye contact with him. This, and it is only the fifth day.

Through these incidents, we note the passage of time, its slow advancement nothing at all like what we have known. The half-hours and hours, time and the new way we are learning to understand it. Twelve hours of walking, fourteen. The only certainty in our days, this cycle we have come to inhabit.

The soles of King's boots have worn through. At lunch, he walks away from the party without a word. The foreman Ferguson takes bets on whether he will return. An hour passes. We are finishing our hunks of damper filled with salted beef when we hear Charley Gray mumbling.

That man there I believe is John King.

When Gray repeats himself, pointing this time into the distance, we know it is not his usual foolish talk, speech for the sake of combating the surrounding quiet. We look up in time to see King on his backside, sliding down the muddy rise, one bare foot in the air. At the bottom of the hill, he falls over, his right hand thrust inside a boot. Without looking at anyone, he walks past the campfire.

Should last through the day, he says, holding the boot sole-up to display the mending he has done with bark and twine.

As we begin to move after lunch, the camel handler Samla staggers to the head of the column. He has not eaten in three days. Everyone but Burke knows this. Samla

advances to speak with the Irishman.

Sir, I am here to inform you that I cannot proceed with meat.

You cannot do what? Burke asks.

Meat, sir. I am Hindu. I cannot eat this meat.

Burke looks at him in confusion. You can't eat the meat?

Sir, I beg your dismissal of me. Please. I cannot eat this meat.

And so it goes. We move on, a column of men, animals, wagons, Ferguson's black mutt. On good days we stretch half a kilometre from front to rear. For the bad days, those times when a wagon wheel sinks at the back of the column and the men in the front have advanced too deep into the wide plain to notice, add another kilometre to the length of our procession. The angle of rain marks the only variation in our days, one flowing into the next as we drift like a river turned back on itself, driven unwillingly into the north country.

Each night, we hang our trousers by the fire and lay our shoes on hot stones, rotating them to the climbing blaze, but nothing comes of it. Only a distant rumour of dryness, the ghost of warmth.

Our equipment weighs twice as much as it should. The canvas tents soaked through. The slowness of men moving beneath the rain. After two hours of packing, sometimes three, we are ready to move on. King commences work with his knife, carving our camp number and our leader's initial, *B*, into a tree. Ten days, fifteen, twenty. King's marks are the only residue we leave behind, evidence for a future version of ourselves. All this morning, the camels slide over the soil, a sight we no longer find humorous. Now their clumsiness serves as a forewarning of all the interruptions that await. On this day, the twenty-third, we move slower than usual.

North to north-east, at the pace of one kilometre an hour. At midday, Landells informs Burke that the camels have diarrhoea.

We must have a day of rest. My camels cannot take this any longer.

Without looking at his second-in-command, Burke returns to the front of the party.

Then, shortly after lunch, a dramatic variation on what we have come to think of as routine. The rain thickens. Hailstones like billiard balls. The party scatters in search of cover. The camels grow furious, their eyes wide and drunken. At the rear of the column, Patten and Ferguson open a bottle of rum.

When the storm ceases, Landells begins shouting that he is frightened for the camels' lives.

I have it in my right mind to turn back, he says. My camels aren't meant for this.

Soon after, Burke approaches. His wet beard hangs to his chest. The bottle disappears inside Patten's coat. Landells lunges at the Irishman. This is no desert, he shouts. Wills grabs Landells by the shoulders to hold him back. Burke grunts in Landells's direction, mounts his horse and rides back to the front of the column to lead us on.

This is no desert. Throughout the day, Landells says it over and over again. To himself. To anyone who will listen. Then, the next day, the sky clears as though someone has lifted a blind, opened the door to a room whose existence we had been told of but which we had begun to regard as fantasy. The new world sprawls before us, bright and unending.

This is how we come to learn the violence of heat. Heat like a straightjacket, relentless smothering that begins at the fingers and quivers through the hands and arms, into the chest and head.

For six days, there is no reprieve. Heat devastating us from dawn to dusk,

stretching our column another half kilometre so that there are times when we cannot see the man in front, the man behind. We are led on by voices, our own, those imagined. After two days of this, the equipment dries. Otherwise, there is nothing to note. Heat, and with it, flies.

At the end of day thirty, Ferguson begins to take bets on who will be the first to break. He makes two lists. One is official, there on paper for all to see. The other, he keeps in his head. Atop the second list, the men have nominated our leader, the Irishman, Robert O'Hara Burke. He of the Galway Clan. Chief Inspector Redface. Sir Scar. All of the names that Landells mutters around the campfire after Burke retires to his tent.

We blame the Chinese gong on Charley Gray. At dawn each day, the ring blasts through the trees. Alone among us, the Afghani camel handlers Dost Mohomet and Esau Khan don't seem to mind. They step hungry-eyed from their tent, expecting to find something new on their breakfast plates, something new from this day that the rest of us mark off in the calendar of our memory, another day begun, another day we must endure.

Mornings are the worst. Another cycle begins. Now that the rains have vanished, we long for them. The way rain's scent fills the air in advance of its fall, thin streams on the face and neck. We know that the rains will return. We know that when they do, it will not be on our terms. It takes little time to learn that this land cares nothing for our concerns.

Soft silhouettes of light fall across our crouched bodies as we wait for the morning fires to quicken. Ferguson grunts as he opens the ovens and loads damper that reeks of sweat. We wait. We smoke and drink black tea from tin mugs that some of the men

hang from their packs for the comfort of its thud, metal upon metal upon canvas and leather.

There are sounds and smells that distinguish our lives and personalities. Identify each man as he joins the circle.

There is the way, for instance, Dr Beckler drags his left boot, sole scraping over the sandy earth like the blade of a shovel hauled by a child. At forty-three, he is the oldest in our party. In Ferguson's journal, near the top, the following note: *He will not make it through the second month.*

Belooch floats from tent to fire and back again. One minute, he sits beside you, the next he is gone. The breeze of his quick body, a slight change in temperature all he leaves in his wake. Belooch, the Parsee camel handler who is incapable of keeping still.

Ferguson steps from his tent, eyes closed, already cursing the thought of another breakfast of damper. He is the only American in our party, a man who has seen gold rushes on two continents but has nothing to show for it save stories and scars. His curses have quietened since Landells complained that he is ruining breakfast for everyone. There is talk of his previous life as a bounty hunter, his dream of owning a steak restaurant in Ballarat. His perpetual promise, *All the meat I will cook for you upon our return.*

Charley Gray, always in the middle of things, shifts on his seat, a rock or stump, whatever the night's camp affords. He ghats against the yearning to tell a joke lately remembered. Does he think of his previous life, his time as a sailor, rounding the Cape of Good Hope, and his new life set adrift in this endless land as being one and the same? *Do you think of past or future at all, Charley Gray?* Burke's question on the forty-third day, after Gray admitted that he *must have been the one to have*

possibly forgotten a crate of food at our previous camp.

The soft scratching of Becker's pencil as it crosses the wide plain of his sketchbook. He has begun preparation for a new painting, *Meteor Seen by Me*, the title written at the bottom of the page in his meticulous hand. Becker. Even if you were to call out to him while he is observing or drawing he would not set his journal down to respond, though he would always recognise the voice and not forget the interruption. *What was it you wanted to tell me? Earlier, when you tried to hinder my observation.*

Patten and his hands that display an entire history. The first and second fingers of the right hand are missing below the nails. *Which one hurt worst?* This was Charley Gray, on day seven. Patten held the hand in question to his face. *The first one*, he said. *How so?* Gray asked. *By the time the second one got caught, all I could do was laugh.* *Laugh?* Gray asked. *How's that, old man? Well, I reckon that anyone foolish enough to make the same mistake twice ought to at least keep a sense of humour about it.* Gray nodding, quiet for the first time in days.

Brahe positioning himself between Landells and Burke, never by their side, always in between, ready to relay messages since day seventeen, when the two men ceased speaking to one another and relied on the gentle German for communication. In the Victorian goldfields, Brahe had been known for his skills of driving wagons from the mud. To the camel handlers, he speaks German and, to our surprise, they often address one another in that language. *Fasst hier an und schiebt den Wagen! Hier? Ja, ja!*

John King's whistling as he mends a pair of socks or some other article of clothing that does not belong to him. Each evening, his bag fills with garments in need of repair, his delicate hands methodical. He can see into the future of our clothes, all the levels of stress that we will inflict upon them in the coming weeks. John King

whistling as he lays someone else's underwear on his lap. It is always the same tune, one that none of us recognised at first and which we no longer notice as he sits beside us, working while we drink our tea and smoke. King, who once a fortnight would visit his sister in St Kilda, the two of them sitting on the beach a month before our departure, a blanket pulled to their chins, mistaken for sisters, or so Charley Gray's story goes.

Through it all, Wills in his efficiency moves like an absence of physical need. From the fire, there is an occasional sighting of the top of his hat as he shifts from one task to the next. He lists the distance we travel, updating our maps each night. He keeps record of watercourses and general terrain, collecting samples of soil and water and minerals. He notes meteorological conditions, levels of rainfall, changes in temperature, gauges the wind as he sits sideways on his camel, eyes moving from page to sky. He has been instructed to make note of any refractions or mirages — *Mirage on the Horizon Seen by Me, William John Wills* (Gray's comment on the sixty-seventh night, after Patten stole another bottle of rum) — and also have the energy to keep us on course since he alone among us is educated in the art of navigation.

Behind the wagons, Landells rubs the camels' heads. Their snorting provides us with dreams of distant places for which we would happily trade. He walks from animal to animal, whispering their names to offer encouragement.

And then there is the Irishman, our leader. For the first five days, there was talk that he left the party each night and returned to Melbourne.

There must be a woman, Charley Gray said.

Yes, a woman, Landells replied. Some lady of the night, I'm sure.

Wills bolted upright. He grabbed the stick that he had been using to poke the fire

and held it to Landells's face. All of us too shocked to speak. Then, as quickly as it started, it was finished. Wills dropped the stick and walked away, his hands on top of his head, as though he were as surprised by his actions as the rest of us. We would not see him again until the next morning. Wills with his boxes of instruments, looking like a man set to move to the other side of the world.

After the first five days, when we had travelled too far from Melbourne for there to be any further discussion of Burke's return to the city each night, the Irishman still disappeared in the evenings while we mended broken gear and fed and watered the animals. It wasn't until the morning, after we had loaded and watered once again that we would hear his horse's hooves drumming the earth, a sound like the hailstorm that beat down on us last week or the week before or perhaps the week before that. No one is willing to turn back the pages of our party's record for fear of finding the entry of our departure, that afternoon when fifteen thousand people came to see us off, fifteen thousand voices whose shouts of encouragement have since been swallowed by this merciless land.

We pass two creeks, a third. At each, we stop and refill our bags, first pressing our lips to the brown water, much like the animals beside us. Then, guided by Burke's orders, we move on, farther into our season of heat and dryness, the time of flies, hour upon hour, the shock of heat replacing the cold that overwhelmed us, once, a lifetime before, until news reaches the rear of the column that we are stopping for the night.

Burke roars the directive, as though he refuses to believe that no better campsite awaits after such a long day, after such a long journey. On this day, our eighty-fifth, we build a fire in what had once been ample riverbed, forty feet from bank to bank, its surface now dry as bone. With our tin plates and mugs, we queue inside the rumour of

river. From Ferguson's table, we take our damper and move beside the fire.

We sit to eat. There are twelve of us now.

Charley Gray taps Landells on the shoulder.

Is this desert enough for your stinking camels?

Chapter 6: Parts Beyond the Seas

HE TRACES THE jagged trail along his cheek, careful not to disturb the scab. It is nothing that a beard, the seemingly unkempt but practised beard of an artist, won't conceal. After all, he has been told that he would look good — mysterious and imposing — with a fuller beard. Time now to discover if there is any truth to those words.

There are internal marks we give ourselves in moments of anger and elation, inscriptions that bear witness to particular junctures in our lives. Some of these marks we carry in our gaze. Others are indelible, like the newly minted scar that adorns Robert O'Hara Burke's face. This incision, this scar, will speak as evidence of one life.

Some will find it intolerable to look at, others a dramatic flair, history written on the body. He will cultivate this wound into more than an accident, all that it represents and which he will try to forget. And if the story born from this mark is one of a duel, the righteous man fighting for his honour, the honour of a woman, he will not protest.

Truth carries light. Myths are born in darkness. What must be must be, he thinks. He will navigate through the tributaries of darkness to locate the source of his own myth.

These are the days of piano playing and song. Sacred days. The scar like a character in a play, his women thinking about it afterwards, when they return home and no song or laughter enters their lives. Or so he imagines.

Then, without giving word to his superiors or the members of his audience, he

leaves his regiment during its final preparations for action in Sardinia.

First, he visits the infirmary to discuss the ailment that has troubled him for the past six months.

What is the problem? the doctor asks.

Here, Burke says, pointing to his abdomen.

The doctor's eyes fix on the scar, wondering why the lieutenant did not come to see him about this since it is much more severe than his current complaint.

Describe the pain for me, the doctor says, without looking away. When does it hurt? How often?

Burke replies to neither question nor to the enquiries that ensue.

The doctor tries a different tact. It is here, you say? He positions his hand on Burke's side and then on his stomach.

Yes, Burke says. There.

Tell me, have you been experiencing regular bowel movements?

Burke does not answer.

The doctor continues. Perhaps *constipation* is the problem?

A name for his illness. Burke's eyes widen. Constipation, he says, if only to repeat the diagnosis. Yes, doctor. That is what I have felt. Tell me. What can I do for it, this constipation?

And perhaps Burke's ever-growing gambling debt, which he has failed to mention to the doctor or his superiors as the true symptom of his pains, has led to some form of physical infirmity. Whatever the case, there is only one thing to do. Now that the diagnosis has come, he cannot be expected to go to Sardinia. What kind of soldier would he be if he charged into battle with such an ailment?

It is decided. He will carry the honours of his rank and use them as tickets to the spa towns of Germany. He will leave all of this behind, if only for a little while, in order to be healed. Time enough to think of ways to settle his debt and restore whatever dignity he has lost.

He sets out alone into the late Italian summer, his only plan to annihilate time. This proves successful for the first week of the journey, five days, the most serene in his life.

In Recoaro, he develops a fever that brings his journey to a sudden halt. He is treated by two brothers, both doctors, also farmers. Over three days, the two men unfurl their lives to this patient who talks, on the rare instances when he can marshal the strength, in German when he is awake and English in his sleep.

By the fourth night of his stay, Burke begins to move around on his own. He opens himself to them, these brothers who have saved him from sickness and possibly something worse.

Later that night, he joins them at their table. Colour has returned to his face. The first hints of pink rise from the crevice of his scar.

I had a brother, Burke says, his mouth full of bread.

Is that so? one asks in Italian.

No, he says. I *have* a brother.

He tells them this on the last night of his stay, offers this single piece of information about his life before the army, as though he had only now remembered the detail. His trouble with tense, he knows, is not due to the language. Instead, it is geography that has thrown him. He has spent much of the past decade building levees to keep certain memories at bay, all the events that, once assembled, give shape to his

life. At dinner, on his final night among them, these levees are breeched.

From Recoaro, he travels north into early autumn. Grafenberg. Aachen. He enters one spa town, then another. Sheds his identity at their gates to become someone else.

Perhaps it is the humidity of the rooms where he spends his mornings, rooms as warm and damp as childhood evenings beside the fire at St Claren's estate, or maybe it is the abundance of water, springs and pools he visits each afternoon to pass the time and clear his mind, that causes him to make the decision. After two weeks in Aachen, an eternity following the swift years since he left Ireland, he packs his bags. As quietly as he arrived, he moves on.

He pushes himself south back into Italy, where the first signs of the changing season greet him like time regained. As though, he tries to convince himself, none of this ever happened. Still, he knows what must come next. If he continues this path and returns to his regiment, there can be only one outcome. A failure to return, however, would be just as damaging to his character as the court martial that awaits.

First comes the punishment, followed by inquiries into the crime. The severity of the situation does not surprise him. What confounds him is the anger they display during the initial hearing. When did this become personal?

Throughout his time in the army, he has stretched the fabric of order. He has pulled until that fabric yielded. Now it has torn.

He sits inside a small room, the single window opening onto an empty courtyard. Twice each day, a guard brings his food and then closes the door when he leaves. Other than these visits, Burke sees no one. There are no more invitations to entertain officers' wives with his singing. He cannot remember when he last touched a piano. His nights at the card table are finished.

Three days after his return, he receives his first visit. Broch arrives unannounced,

trails into the small room after the noon meal. The door now closed, they embrace as though they haven't seen each other in years. They offer half-smiles, falling into erratic gestures and incoherent mumblings to mask the discomfort of their surroundings.

They sit together on the narrow bed and stare at the floor.

You do understand the severity of this case, the *strangeness* of it, don't you? Broch asks.

Burke looks at him, nods. He crosses his legs, leans back to put his weight on his elbows. I'm not quite sure that I believe it myself, he says.

You could have told me, Broch says. If you would have mentioned your ... He hesitates, knowing the word will offend, but he must persist. Your *debts*, Robert. I would have done anything I could to have helped. You know that.

Burke smiles. Of course, he says. But these are my mistakes, my doings entirely. I could not have asked for help.

They aren't sure how to deal with your case, Broch says, sighing. This is uncomfortable for them. There doesn't seem to be a precedent, at least nothing that they can find, that comes close to this. Your leaving. Your *disappearing* (this word he whispers) under these circumstances.

Are they taking suggestions?

Happy to see that his friend has not lost his willingness to charm, Broch grins. He then resumes his previous, grave expression. There is news, Robert.

Burke leans forward. Go on.

There has been a second inquiry. I was told — and you have to understand that this is, for now at least, confidential — that a decision was reached earlier today.

Burke raises his eyebrows.

It seems that you still have some friends here, Robert.

For a moment, good news, news that is followed by the slight bruise of ego, *still have*. Burke weighs the loss of friendship against the threat of other, unmentionable outcomes. Though these injuries are permanent, this is nothing, he thinks, that won't heal with time, distance.

They've decided that you ran up your debts out of carelessness rather than deceit.

Burke nods. I can live with that. What else?

For this reason, they have decided to be lenient. You will be asked to resign.

I was prepared to do that anyway. This time he fails to make Broch smile.

To resign dishonourably, of course.

Burke lowers his head.

The words that he knew would come have come. There is no taking them back. Until now, he has stood on the margins and watched as others have decided his fate. Why should this be any different?

Broch rises. They refrain from speaking, holding on to the final wave of silence before they part, aware that this will be the last time they see one another. As for Burke, he knows the process of parting ways, has learned it well over the years. There are words he would rather not say to anyone again, words which he keeps to himself as Broch knocks on the door and the two men listen for the guard's footsteps.

Not because he is stripped of uniform but because the verdict removes a lightness from his step, places a moment's hesitation in his previously steady gaze, he returns to Ireland with plans to lose himself in the familiarity of home. He travels to Kildare, joins the constabulary. Three drinks and a handshake. It is as simple as that. An honourable profession, he thinks, for the prodigal's return.

For all his new colleagues are concerned, his biography — that list of feats, some true, others invented — might as well be blank. They do not know him, nor has he taken the first steps to prove himself. These early days pass without laughter, the nights without women or song. This time of drought he accepts like a penance.

Things continue in this manner for three weeks. Then comes an opportunity to compose the first pages of his new life.

Early morning, a Tuesday. He is at his desk when the others arrive. Those fellow officers who already discuss their weekend plans. As usual, they know that he is among them, off to the side, sitting at his desk. Feet propped on its surface, a stack of reports on his lap. His new colleagues can trace their friendships back generations. Their great grandfathers had lived these same lives, told versions of these very stories. These men whose jaws and passions are echoes of other men.

At first he isn't sure if he has heard correctly. One of them, it seems, has planned a weekend of sporting events, an opportunity to satisfy their eternal need for competition.

He pretends to be busy. Only when they approach from the other side of the room does he acknowledge them. They gather around. The one who has made the proposal places his hands on the desk's edge, grips it to display the tightening muscles of his forearms.

What's it going to be, then, Burke?

He lifts his chin. Gives a look of uncertainty, as though he has better things to do than eavesdrop on their conversation.

What's your sport, O'Hara? asks another.

He leans back in his chair, offers a slight grin.

Afterwards, they talk without pause. They do little to mask their surprise and appreciation of what some call skill and others, art. In this ceremony, he takes no part. He knows that his decision to remain silent will speak louder than anything he could say about his aptitude with a leather ball. Somewhere along the way, he wonders why these men have not learned to extinguish excitement over a colleague's accomplishments on the sporting field.

See how easily he enters their everyday language and customs. It is enough to make him wonder whether winning over this audience was too easy. Before the weekend match, they thought him slow, weak. Good enough reasons not to induct him into their circle. Now, they devise a new label for him. After his performance, he is Cunning, Sly Burke, regardless of the uniform he wears.

He leaves the station to make a routine pass through the adjacent neighbourhoods. It is much less a patrolling of streets than an opportunity for fresh air. People on the footpath greet him as he passes. Two days before, he believed that these same men and women did not know his name.

He pretends to be oblivious to the hope that an athlete gives to certain classes, the prospect to worship a fellow human and bestow accolades that provide opportunity to leave all else behind. But he cannot deny the reasons he has worked to sharpen his athletic skills in the first place.

Children gathered around a worn ball stop in mid-kick to watch him pass. They slap each other on the back, calling for silence, respect. To each, he nods, shoulders square. He walks with purpose but offers no hint that he could thrust his body along the path any faster than his current stroll. No matter, though. The secret is out.

Time passes, several years. In the first months after he left the army, he learned to fool

himself into accepting the lies, those trivial reasons he accepted for returning to the country of his birth. He made lists: *This is home. This is the small corner where I was born.* Then, when those thoughts proved insufficient, he began to think: *I have had my time away. I must now accept what I have done, what I must do.*

Then he awakens in a new city.

He is walking alone through a dimly lit Dublin street after work when he stops in front of a pub. It is the second week of his new life and, though he has never been inside, he has already passed this door many times. Tonight, the sounds of laughter that seep through the stained windows, the soft glow from within, beckon him. Besides, it's cold out, the rain has strengthened, and he could use a drink.

He finds an empty seat at the edge of the bar. After his second round, he hears someone calling from behind. He turns to see a stranger, crooked and drunk, facing him.

With the bottom of an empty mug, the man taps Burke's shoulder. Hey, he says. Hey. What're you laughing at?

Burke looks away.

What's the matter? The man continues his persistent tapping. Can't talk?

At these words, Burke stands. The drunk's face sinks to his shoulders. Burke grabs him by the collar, drags him outside. He delivers the drunk safely to the doorstep of the adjoining building and re-enters the pub without comment. All eyes now on the new man who wears the uniform of a mounted policeman and refuses to acknowledge that anything out of the ordinary has taken place.

Life in Ireland all these years, as though it were not his own — his desires quelled somewhere in the cold grey sea — has ruptured his sense of humour, his ability to

negotiate with the local drunk and receive a good night's laugh that would in turn produce a few minutes of storytelling the next day at the station. A little something to pass the time. None of it helps, not anymore.

He develops a routine. After work each day, he returns to the pub. By the time he reaches his stool, the room's assaulting odours vanish and he settles into the night. He sits at the edge of the bar and listens to stories dusted with politics and sex, pretending all the while to be more curious about the contours of the mug in front of him. He inhales these nights, this talk that comes to him from all corners of the room.

He turns his ear to the best offerings and chooses among the stories. To his right, there is talk of the continent which years before instilled such anger and fear in these same men, the names of some of its regions unmentionable still. There are places whose names can enter conversation by a narrowing of the eyes, a curling of the lip, and this was once one of them. But tonight the syllables of its whole stretch like sanctuary across the crowded room. A continent that is an island that was once a penal colony. A land atoning for its past deeds through offerings of gold.

There are palaces of gold to be found, I tell you. Palaces.

Man found himself a nugget the size of his noggin not long back, I hear.

Drunken banter of grand plans and awaiting adventure. Half a dozen voices, each with its own scheme to secure fortune and live not so humbly ever after. These voices are followed by silences that enter the thread of the old men's plotting, their harmless threats to take action while revealing through their lowered eyes and slouched backs the futility of such fantasies.

Burke listens for more than an hour. He knows the men's stories contain occasional truths, but for the most part they merely provide hope in the ongoing struggle to survive another Wednesday night in the skin of what their lives have

become. Still, he cannot help himself. He has fallen for it, for all of it. He begins to chart his course to the edge of the earth and the adventure about which they speak.

He pays a visit to his Dublin relatives, a maternal aunt and uncle. Until now, they have slipped his mind entirely. They are pleased to hear from him after all these years, a bit surprised, they say.

After they speak of all they have done during his time abroad, he mentions his plan and the favours that, as family, he imagines they will be more than happy to provide. They agree to look into the matter for him.

After one month without any word about the fortune and adventure that await him at the bottom of the world, Burke decides to put the idea behind him. He slouches through his days. During this time, he begins to invent reports. At first, he changes small details — one day of the week becomes another — but soon he turns to pure invention. Then he arrives home to find a letter waiting for him.

There is little to do, few preparations to make in the weeks leading to his departure. In the evenings at the pub, he listens to the old men's stories of the gold rush, stories that grow more exciting with each teller's looping forays into pending wealth and power, the level of danger, even death, lives buried in the untamed earth. By now, he has moved closer to their table, waiting for the men to deal his hand.

On the night before he leaves, after half an hour's litany of tales (by now he has heard them all, they recur each night in slight variations), Burke speaks for the first time. Raises his voice during the lull in the ongoing saga.

Yes, he says. Tomorrow, I, too, will sail to make my fortune in those parts beyond the seas. He lifts his mug to the old men.

Say again? The speaker turns his head to Burke, pushing the back of his left ear forward.

I'll be on my way tomorrow. Off to the gold rush. He tries to maintain a serious look but cannot stop himself from smiling.

Isn't this the news they have been waiting for? Haven't they all wanted to see whether anyone among them would take this last heroic step? The man with the scar has come forward. Though it was not what they expected, Burke knows they will be more than happy to claim this news as their own victory.

There are shouts around the table. Glass meeting glass, liquid spilling onto wood. They order another round of drinks, Burke making promises to return a wealthy man who will remember his friends.

The night passes, two hours of laughter. The proprietor waddles up to the table, thumbs pressing into his thick waist.

It's late, he says. Your wives'll be wanting to know where you are.

They move outside and gather around Burke in the damp night. They offer final wishes of luck to this man who has given them another strand to continue their nightly narrative. Already, he can hear their new story, the story that tells of one of their own, the man who sailed to exhume his fortune from the tainted land. By now, it is too late for them to ask his name.

HAD THEY BEEN on the same ship travelling to the continent, perhaps Burke would have been less irrational at seeing Julia for the first time in Beechworth, five years later. That night when she stepped onto the stage and, with a single word, changed everything.

On a ship whose bow prepares to penetrate the equator, Julia, aged eleven, is all curls and stained dresses. Certain members of the crew fear for her safety. They chase after her while her mother stands off to the side, refusing to watch.

In London, she had few friends. Parents complained of her presence. Mothers complained, that is. Her companions' fathers, on the other hand, recognised in this supposed devil child the seed of some little original sin. One day, they knew, it would ripen into a shock of sexual energy. Later, that energy would pierce the guts of their own sons. For now, they were grateful for any tantrum she might throw.

Her life had in many ways been preordained. Idle days followed by nights on stage: it was stamped into her emotional and physical being. But one day, her parents had to make a decision.

Julia would flourish in the colony. Once settled, they would find a fledgling community in need of entertainment and personalities to claim as its own. If she wanted, she could always make an astonishing return to London. It would make a good story, her mother thought as she drafted Julia's career.

Sydney.

Long before she disembarks, there are flooding aches of non-recognition. She surveys the harbour, this place that is not home and never will be. Only recently had she acknowledged the flora and fauna of London. Now, she is here, and nothing is as it once was, as it should be.

To show gratitude for her parents' decision to move, she goes into self-imposed

exile. Her mother's attempts to lure her from her room — adorned with the childish belongings she has so meticulously packed, believing that if forced into a life she does not choose, the very least she can do is imitate her past — go unheeded.

She waits. Then one day her mother's cries for reason cease. This brings a silence more deafening than any Julia can remember. She moves from her bed and stands in front of the mirror. She transforms herself from sad, lonely Julia into a furious child in search of revenge. Only this (she wants to shout it) is no act.

She unlocks the door and walks through the rooms of the house. Steps into the kitchen, finds no one. She crosses the hall to her father's study, where she expects to see him reviewing the diagrams in one of his books on the art of articular flowers. Despite her praise of his creations, Julia still considers them trite imitations, *charming*, as she has told him many times, but without any of the edge she deems essential for true beauty.

She searches for direction, some previous training that will inform her of what to do, but there are no rehearsals for this. For much of her life, she has been satisfied to live for the eyes of others. Her mother has encouraged it and, for her part, Julia has assured herself that she is prepared to make whatever sacrifices the task requires. But if life sometimes demands that we see ourselves at the centre of whatever world we inhabit, then that position, Julia has decided, must continue after she leaves the stage.

From the porch, she steps into summer radiance. She thinks of returning for her hat. It will protect her from the sun that her mother has warned her so much about, but covering her face no longer matters, not now.

A strange sensation, this, walking alone, without anyone to observe her. With no audience seated in the shadows, all she can do is hope that her legs will guide her onward. She is alone. The feeling is more terrifying than anything she has known.

She rounds the corner of the house and sees, at last, the top of her mother's bonnet bobbing in the distance. Mrs Matthews is on her knees in the area they call the garden but which looks to Julia like a patch of wasteland. Julia stops fighting the tears and cries unremittingly. She rushes to her mother's side, sinks beside her.

Observe them as Mrs Matthews presses her left hand into the dirt. Soil slips through the hollow between skin and wedding ring. She pushes herself up and moves, arms outstretched, towards the child.

Where were you? Julia asks between sobs.

I was here.

Before, she says. Where were you before? Where have you been?

I'm here now. We're together now.

You weren't there. I called and called, but you weren't there. I went to find you but I couldn't find you. You weren't anywhere.

Do you think that I would leave you, Julia? Look at me.

The child lifts her head.

Come, she says, taking Julia's hand.

They become a fixture about town, these two. Through motley throngs they move from theatre to theatre. Not even on the wharves of Liverpool did they see such a wide array of humankind.

During today's audition, Mrs Matthews asks for permission to stand offstage, just out of her daughter's sight. This role, she knows, will become Julia's. Her daughter exudes a confidence reserved for actresses in summery bloom, their conviction fortified by hard work, patience and the terror of ageing, and Julia has scarcely begun.

After the audition, they go home to wait. A letter arrives the next morning. They pass the small cream envelope back and forth.

You open it! Julia demands.

No, you! The house resonant with laughter.

They stand in the dining room, giggling like sisters, the letter resting on the table before them.

At last, Mrs Matthews reaches a decision. I'll hold one side and you the other.

They grip the opposite edges and begin to tear, each now culpable for whatever verdict the letter conveys. After reading the first sentences, they look at each other as though it had been impractical to doubt the contents. Good news that releases itself throughout the rooms of the house as a shriek, two voices curling around one another to become indistinguishable.

To Mr Matthews, alone in his study, an open book on his lap, the shrill cry comes like an assault. As for his wife, if she did not want this moment for herself, if all of the fears of rejection she had for her daughter were too overwhelming, she can no longer doubt Julia's talent. Until now, Mrs Matthews has thought that Julia was a work in progress, much like her husband's flowers. In their new home, this new life on the continent at the edge of the map, the first sign of approval. Her Janus-like gaze. Her ability to love and wound, seduce and betray.

People stand beneath the awnings of shops, each in place to stake his claim. These men from various reaches of the earth who have arrived in the colony and are prepared to spill their blood into its soil and wait patiently to reap whatever harvest it yields.

Everyone Burke meets claims success. No one is prepared to face the consequences that would ensue if they were to admit otherwise.

At a prospector's store, he meets a sailor from New Orleans who in six years has

not seen that port city or the wife and children he left behind. Of their faces, the variations of his sons' voices or his wife's fingers working against his skin in the humid night, he recalls little, his memory grown hazy in the interim. All those years that separate them as he travels from one country to the next, pursuing the fortune that will carry his name for generations.

When did you arrive? Burke asks.

The man is silent, stone-faced while he searches for an answer.

What year is it? he asks.

They work each day out of greed, a hunger they cannot satisfy. In these men, Burke sees a yearning for something that he would prefer not to inherit. Begin with the facts this life offers and end in myth. This is what he wants. Nothing more, nothing less. But (to begin with) these are not the facts that he had in mind. If it were only about work and money, he would have never left Ireland.

The scene is a drunken night. It could be any pub in Dublin. A warm breeze quiets the crowd of men who walk with the light step of animals prowling a campsite before dawn. Eyes narrowed at fellow men, heads turned up, they sniff for signs of betrayal.

In daylight or darkness, you learn to follow codes. You never know what will come for you from behind. Whatever you see must be stored away in deepest memory, a spark kept alive to ignite physical response, quick and exact. You learn the art of periphery, the ongoing dance of suspecting, always, without ever appearing to suspect at all. Here there are no rules. Here everything is a rule, each prone to change in the dead of night and without your consent. Those not indoctrinated after the first few days stand little chance of survival. No matter to Burke, though. The colony is booming.

And so he looks elsewhere, far from the madness of these crowds. Once again, as

though he cannot endure the thought of life without a uniform, he finds himself seated before the police superintendent. They are five minutes into the interview and already Burke has charmed the man with stories of adventure, women. Theirs is the jovial banter of fellow countrymen who find themselves shipwrecked on the far reaches of the globe.

What's that accent? the chief, a Derry man, asks.

Galway. But I can do Cork or Limerick if need be. He waits a few seconds before flashing a grin.

Never been to Galway, the chief says. His eyes wander to the scar that Burke has come to think of as a strength, something that sets him apart from those whose experience may outweigh his own but whose character will, in the long run, always fall short. Burke adjusts his face, offers a clearer view.

No? he says. I'll have to take you there. We'll have a night out on the town.

The chief laughs. Had a wife, dead two years now. Born of a Galway lass. Good woman, that. Bless her soul. Always talking, always. Wouldn't let me be. Do this, do that, she would say. There was fire in that woman, I tell you, a real fire.

Do you know what this means? Burke asks.

Tell me, Galway. What does this mean?

I think we're related.

They schedule a meeting for the following day, noon. A noon meeting, Burke thinks, means lunch, drinks. He leaves the station confident that their handshake has secured a position in the city and that the chief will provide the proper introduction to the undisclosed workings of his new home. Several weeks after his arrival, he is still surprised by the way it bustles into the night, nothing like the muddy port he had

heard so much about before he left Ireland.

He arrives at the station several minutes early and sees the superintendent hunched over a pile of papers. He approaches with certainty, whistling boldly as he navigates the busy office. After all, doesn't he own a little part of this place now?

That's a lot of work you've got yourself there, Burke says, leaning over the superintendent's desk.

The man looks up, squints. Can I help you?

Burke grins. Robert O'Hara Burke, reporting for duty.

The superintendent continues to stare at him.

I was here just —

Oh, yes. Right. Cousin Burke. Please, have a seat. He searches through his papers. I got caught up in work, he says. But you will soon get to know what that is all about, won't you?

There is no humour in the superintendent's voice. After some shuffling, he locates the documents and slides them across the desk.

Read through these. You'll see that everything is in order.

Burke glances over the documents.

Only one last thing. The superintendent adds several more papers to Burke's pile. I'll need you to sign these, as well.

At the top of the page is the name of a station or district, Burke is not sure which. He has never seen it before. He hesitates, his forehead breaking into a shock of creases.

What's the matter? the superintendent asks.

I don't follow, Burke says. Beechworth. What is Beechworth?

The man leans back in his chair. Well there's nothing to worry about, Cousin

Burke. You'll get along fine there. You even have your own title. Look. He puts his finger on the top of the page. Acting Inspector. That's more than I can offer most men who walk through these doors. Consider it a gift. It's what family's for.

She comes home with news that they will be leaving.

Pack only what you can carry, Mrs Matthews says. The company will take care of the rest.

Five years have passed. A lifetime, Julia thinks, beneath this malicious sun. She looks at herself in the mirror. She pinches her cheeks, which no longer redden at her touch, and thinks, *I am no longer English*.

For some time, she has been able to assemble the ongoing conversation that rises from her parents' bedroom. She has arranged the shards of their talk to discover the channel to her future: she will become a member of a travelling theatre company. She has heard them speak of this new opportunity for work and widening her audiences and, that final annotation that arrives like dessert, mention of the financial prospects such work will provide.

It is all arranged. There will be no need for an audition. Mrs Matthews has spoken with the producer. He saw Julia perform two months before and has the perfect part in mind. Though it isn't the lead, the play's title, *The Spoiled Child*, refers at once to Julia's character and (Mrs Matthews thinks but would never say) her truest nature, as well.

The news of leaving, yet again. It comes like a slap. She tells her mother there are plays that detail such abuse, the neglected child who spends her days hard at work to support her family

Those are roles in plays, Julia shouts, struggling for examples. But this. This is my

life!

For the first time, there is a public to consider. How will they get on without her? These thoughts she cries into the pillow, alone in her room, white, soaked with the spoils of her life. So she runs away — walks out the front door, for children run, she thinks, and despite her recent tantrum, she is no longer a child. Once outside, she turns left and walks several blocks.

Friday evening. Crowds stroll past her, men and women, children all enjoying the unseasonable warmth. Julia stands in front of a shop window, watching the women inside talk to one another without lifting their eyes from the fabric they hold up for inspection. Her left foot is suspended above the kerb.

This is when it happens.

Another body rounding the corner.

Two bodies colliding on a Sydney street.

The contact of clothes, then eyes.

His apology, a voice gentle and sincere.

For a moment, she forgets about the life she will return to. This man, a stranger, but somehow utterly familiar. The two of them on a busy street. A voice she thinks she has known all her life.

It takes less than a minute. That is all. They part as awkwardly as they merged. She turns and proceeds unsteadily, thankful to see a familiar door in the distance, a place for her to disappear, far from his unsettling gaze.

C,

I have decided to leave earlier than I planned in hope of joining Dr Catherwood's Expedition. Think of last night. Remember my feelings for you. Remember (and try not to blush, C) my feeling.

Yours,

William

Wills was one of hundreds in the colony whose pledge helped to fund Catherwood's expedition, though it wasn't for this reason that he felt entitled to join the fastidious grey-haired physician, who had already turned down his application, even after he offered to work without pay. For weeks afterwards, Wills was dejected. In those days, he saw her often, leaving his books unopened. His recent reserve heightened Julia's attraction to him, made him somehow more whole, a man, she thought, whose layers she would get to know one at a time. Though he wouldn't admit it, he thought of Catherwood's rejection as his first failure and, therefore, the harshest moment of his life. So when he saw someone on the street who knew that he had applied to join the expedition, which departed two weeks before, Wills just shrugged and said that the good doctor already had a surveyor.

Good doctor?

Wills didn't know how to respond.

You just called that man a *good* doctor, William Wills.

That I did.

Bloody wild bastard if ever there were one.

He convinced himself that the explorer couldn't afford to turn him down if he reached the party in its early stages and volunteered.

For three days, he walked, twelve hours each day. Julia's smell on his clothes and skin, tugging at his progress. For several hours, beginning at midday, he rested. Wills, who at age twelve decided that he must learn to preserve his body for the coming years. There were days when he helped his father in the surgery and the older man thought his eldest son had fallen asleep. More than once, Dr Wills had said, hoping to nudge William into action and out of his habit of thinking things through from every angle before acting, *It's dark out, William. I suppose we should stop for lunch.*

He came upon Catherwood's camp an hour before dusk. From fifty metres away, he could see three men sitting beside a small fire. Behind the main tent were four horses, sturdy in the last light. To the left of that tent were two smaller ones. There were no wagons.

From this distance, Wills began calling to them, wary of surprising a gang of armed and possibly drunk explorers. The men turned.

Catherwood sat to the left. Wills approached and reintroduced himself.

Where in God's name have you come from? Catherwood asked.

I've walked from Ballarat, he said. It's taken me days, but now I've found you.

The other men started to laugh but Catherwood's stern scowl hushed them. Turning to Wills, he said, The expedition is finished. It is over.

It never started, Wills thought he heard one of the men say before their chuckling resumed, a bottle wedged between each man's knees. This time Catherwood's scowl could not stop their laughter.

In their hands, Wills could see bundles of money. Their fingers worked the notes, lips moving as they counted. Wills looked up to survey the disorderly camp.

What has happened here? he asked. He hadn't meant to articulate the thought.

At this, Catherwood rose. What business do you have here, young man? He began

moving Wills away from the fire.

I have walked all the way from Ballarat with the intention of joining the expedition, Wills said. I will work for my keep.

Go home, Catherwood said. Go back to where you came from. Forget what you saw here.

Behind Catherwood, the two others exchanged their individual totals and then added them together.

I've walked for days, sir. I've left everything to join you.

What makes you think that we would need you? Catherwood asked.

By now, Wills was pushed against the edge of the clearing, his foot stepping back into the bush from which he had so recently sprung forth.

Any expedition could use a skilled surveyor. I —

I told you that this is no longer an expedition, John —

William, he said. William John Wills, sir. He did not ask when the expedition became a non-expedition or how it came to be such, or how this man, a doctor, was capable of an act that would bring disgrace upon others who called themselves doctors or explorers. Instead, he did as he had been taught. He thanked Catherwood for his time and turned away, the men's laughter trailing behind. And in their laughter, Wills could hear the total figure they stole from contributors to use as they pleased, £1 of which he contributed to this expedition and its grand promises to advance the colony's scientific knowledge.

HE WAKES TO the rhythm of his legs moving in the cold night. He is walking. His pace quickens, he is running, he is running towards something he cannot discern. He has dreamed of running before, his face wet with rain, but there is nothing to which he can compare this moment.

There are no camels, no horses. Gray is dead. He runs to catch up with the two others, their bodies white against the darkening horizon. Even in his dreams, King remembers to balance the exertion of his steps with the cadence of his breathing — ten long strides, countered with ten deep breaths. All of this he tallies on his fingers.

He looks up. He is alone. The others are gone, they are lost. With his silence, he has killed them. He must focus. If he wants to gather everything he has left behind, he must find his way back. Return himself to all that came before.

Picture Gray. For three days, he has complained of soreness in his legs and arms, tingling sensations, his whole body growing unreliable.

It's all numb, he says.

What is numb? Burke asks.

Everything. Look. He holds out his swollen hands for the others to examine. Burke turns away, inspects his own hands for similar betrayals.

The same Charley Gray who had complained of brain melt and burnt lungs, now doubled over, swollen hands clutching his stomach.

The next day, they leave him slumped beneath a tree and set out to find water. A month before, when they first passed through these parts, there had been a creek. Wills noted it in his journal. He has led them back to that creek, but where they previously found flowing water they now encounter a puddle of sludge. Wills pulls out his journal to consult the facts, now altered by gods whose supremacy he has lately fathomed in full. King watches as the others get onto their hands and knees and

take the stagnant brown water in with their tongues. Once satisfied, they remove several tin cups, emptying the silt into larger canteens, each man believing that he has stumbled upon an oasis.

Later, returning to the camp, they can hear Charley Gray long before they see him. He imagines that Gray grew up in a house filled with women, each of them waiting for his summons, sighs and moans that in these past days, since the sickness took hold, King has tried his best to ignore. When they reach him, Gray's cheeks are swollen with food, tasteless provisions that he has filched in their absence but which he cannot swallow. The evidence concealed in his mouth, Gray attempts to hide behind the tree. Burke raises his fist. Wills and King stand back, twenty paces away, their heads lowered, resistant to the sounds. Burke grabs hold of Gray's neck. A tin plate rings against the blistered earth. Burke's knuckles prod at skin and bone, for by now all meat has withered from the man's body, the decrepit thief, their friend and jester. Charley Gray. Within three days, he will be dead.

In his dreams, King finds himself before the Committee, their single question recurring like church bells at eternal noon: *How did Charles Gray reach his death?*

Will he be able to state with certainty that his friend's death was not caused by Burke's hand? If he took one piece of this tale away and replaced it with another, would their entire history evaporate like the inland ocean?

THEY HEAD FOR Swan Hill early the next morning, this time with Brahe in tow. What began four days prior as orderly silence has turned, after last night's revelations, to perceptible unease. Still, they are not prepared to discuss where this news will lead them.

Through the morning mist, they move on, five solemn figures on horseback, Howitt in the lead. Of all the things he has prepared for, of everything he had envisioned he would discover during the first stages of this journey, he has failed to imagine anything like this — the arrival, so early, of a revelation such as Brahe delivered last night. All along, he has anticipated that there would be time. He expected it, as though the first stages of the journey were not conciliation for the severity of what awaited but instead an entitlement to proceed slowly, with caution. If his previous transits in the desert taught him anything, it was to remain patient, to respect the slow unfurling of time. He knew that once he and his men travelled beyond the last outpost and the land opened before them, the nature of time would change, as well. Only in this way, Howitt believed, could he latch onto Burke's tracks.

He marks the scented letters as the first of his discoveries. For the first few days, the letters provided nourishment, a confirmation that his rational planning was successful and that along the way he would discover traces of this story and pluck them from the unmarked trail. But if finding the letters was his first discovery, the onset of Brahe's news has drained whatever potency those letters contained.

Now that Brahe has carried the story into the light (a story, like the men it speaks of, that is merely half alive, Howitt fears), how are they to proceed? For the first time, his reasoning — that, in time, he would locate the expedition and return its members safely to Melbourne — strikes him as absurd.

He knows what must be done. He knows that he must send a telegram to the

Committee, informing them of Brahe's news. This will be his first action once they reach Swan Hill. As evidence, he will submit Brahe's story — this inconvenient desert interlude, nothing much to worry about, he will say, not yet, not if the Committee allows him to carry on as planned.

That is the tone his telegram must strike. But how will he present the scale of Brahe's fears — that Burke and those other men have been absent beyond the designated time, stranded in the desert, their rations dwindled to nothing since the end of last month, perhaps before — and at the same time convince the Committee to allow him to continue his search at once? How, in the fractured story that Brahe has relayed, a story that he must fracture even further so that the Committee will digest it as he wants them to, can he convey all that Brahe released last night? Finally, how can he be certain that his words will not spill from the Committee chambers to incite panic in the city streets?

Since his earliest successes, Howitt has presented himself to the Committee and, when the opportunity afforded itself, the general public, as circumspect, a man whose manner and actions inspire immediate and ultimate trust. While others devised similar routes for their professional ascendancy, Howitt's energies were not (as he would think but never say) misdirected. Even as a child, he was eager to work and please. The reward, he knew, would come not in the invitation but in the appointment. Three hours before he arrives in Swan Hill, with the possibility that this, his greatest appointment yet, will be interrupted, the thought rises in his throat like bile.

We'll stop here, he says.

They walk the horses downstream, ten yards, fifteen, before Howitt selects a patch beside the river. He sits and spreads the map across his lap.

Without delay, Welch and Aitkin set out to gather wood for the fire, leaving

Vinning to unpack the morning tea. From a large bag, he removes four small sacks, knowing that once he cooks the contents he will have to stretch these portions further than usual in order to feed the new member of their party.

Brahe lies in the grass to Howitt's left, near the river's edge. His hat covers his face, arms resting on his chest in undertaker's design. Howitt places his finger on the centre of the map, pretending to be absorbed by names and markings that he committed to memory long ago.

The Committee will tell him to return to the city. To prevent the humiliation of having three parties adrift at the same time, they will assemble at once to discuss this unfortunate development and demand his return. The Committee will tell him that he must stand aside and await its decision before he sets out again. Meanwhile, Burke, Wills, Gray and King will continue to wrangle with the heat and flies. For yet another day, they will fend off the onset of burnt lungs, brain melt, and all the other maladies the desert and Charley Gray have taught them to fear. This, Howitt thinks, in the best of all possible circumstances.

Meanwhile, he will sit quietly, powerless before their formal grumbling. Unable to interrupt when talk of rescue turns to accusation, he will be resigned to listen as they argue over what went wrong, and how. And the bigger question: why has this wrongdoing fallen upon Burke's party and, by extension, themselves?

How long, he wonders, will it take the Committee to select a scapegoat? To snuff the first flames, before public hysteria swells around their proceedings, they will go after Brahe. Howitt lifts his eyes from the map and focuses on the German. In that moment, he makes a pact. He will do all he can to protect Brahe. He has smelled the letters, he has seen the initial written boldly on the back. C. He must do whatever he can to protect these men, this C, whoever she might be. He will work until he

understands this story. If it takes a lifetime.

They reach Swan Hill by early evening. Halfway along the wide track, they hear the first signs of activity. Unmistakable sounds, quivers from a nearby pub, glide across the main street.

Once they reach the pub, Vinning and Aitkin set off to enquire about rooms for the night.

Tell them that we may need to stay for several days to come, Howitt says. Let them know who you are. If necessary.

Both men nod before moving inside, impatient to be among others who do not share their burden. Welch stands beside his horse, his face turned from Brahe.

Aren't you coming in? Howitt asks.

Without speaking, the two men follow him inside.

Once there, the chatter ceases. All eyes focus on the new men. Howitt moves across the room and past its dozen small tables, most of them empty.

To the barman, he says, I need you to tell me where I can send a telegram.

A telegram? the man repeats, making sure that he has heard correctly.

Yes.

You want to send a telegram at this time of day?

This is urgent. It's essential that I send a telegram immediately.

Well, you won't be able to send one now, the barman says. He turns from Howitt. With a dirty rag that hangs from his apron, he wipes several glasses, replaces them on the shelves.

Has the operator closed for the night?

What? Oh, no, no. You've just missed him. Man was sitting right there five

minutes ago. He points to the stool beside Howitt.

Howitt leans over the bar. It's important that I send a message tonight. What he wants to say next, that men's lives are at stake, he keeps to himself. Then he notices the barman's chuckle.

I can assure you that this is no laughing matter, Howitt says. Now if you'll please tell me where the operator went, or where he lives, then I can catch him before it's too late.

The barman slides a chipped glass, half full, in front of Howitt. Drink up. Relax.

Howitt shakes his head in frustration. There's no time for this, he says. Just as he turns his back, the barman begins to speak.

Hold on, now. Sit still. Your operator'll be back. He's just gone out back to relieve himself.

The man fumbles for his keys. He mutters expletives under his breath, which Howitt pretends not to hear. After he unlocks the door, Howitt follows him inside.

I hope this won't take long, the operator says, wobbling on his feet. I don't have all night, and I'd like to get back to the pub before my wife sends someone looking for me.

I'll need a pen, Howitt says. A pen and a sheet of paper.

The operator looks up. The lines around his mouth pull tight.

Folks normally just tell me what they want to say. Then I run it through the wire here. He moves his hands to demonstrate the process.

Please, Howitt says. A pen and paper. There isn't much time.

Stepping aside, the operator mocks Howitt's last phrase. After several seconds of shuffling through the clutter on the table, he tears half a sheet from a journal and

places it on the counter.

There. It's all I've got. In anticipation of a challenge, he crosses his arms over his chest.

Each time Howitt scratches out one sentence and begins again, the operator curses, kicks the counter in frustration. Howitt covers one side of the page and hurries to the other. Several minutes pass. He reads through his statement, hearing the printed words in Brahe's voice. He strikes a straight line through several sentences before setting the pen on the counter.

There, he says. I'm ready.

Well, now that we're here, you might as well make me work. I'm listening.

Without preamble, Howitt reads his message, alert to the changes in the man's posture as the story gathers momentum from its mundane commencement — *Have returned to Swan Hill* — to include names of men whose activities the operator has followed these past months and which have penetrated all levels of conversation. Then, as though this talk has summoned those men's spirits, this man who almost dragged the operator from the pub releases news that others had spoken of with intoxicated authority.

This précis of Brahe's story is now irrevocable, but as much as Howitt would like to take those words back, he knows they are not his to reclaim.

Once the operator pulls himself together and begins, Howitt believes that he can distinguish from the man's lips two words which he repeats over and over again — *Good God* — though going on thirty-six hours without sleep makes him unsure whether the voice belongs to the sobering operator or to Brahe on the Loddon River.

Howitt listens to the metal tapping, slow tapping like an erratic heartbeat.

Chapter 7: The Elements of Seduction

WHEN IT FINALLY happens, it is quick, hushed. He passes the first sign without much thought. Rarely does he take the time to stop and observe these surroundings, drab in their familiarity, but something about the second sign catches his attention.

He can make out the first two words, *FINAL PERFORMANCE*, long before he draws near. Burke walks closer, close enough that, should he want to, he could trace the painted letters with his

hearing the words can he be certain of their meaning.

All along, he has known the end would come, that it must. He retraces his steps to look at the other signs (similar in size, colour) to see whether the phrasing differs. But no. Each bears the same message: *FINAL PERFORMANCE SATURDAY NIGHT*.

This, he thinks, is how things come to an end: without warning, with little time for resolve. He has not tried to convince himself that the company would remain in Beechworth forever,

This time he reads the message aloud, as though only by fingers

but hadn't she arrived only the week before? Walked onto the stage and worried that fine piece of cloth, the folds of which he can now tease from his memory? Standing in front of a sign on this Friday morning, he can hear her utter that single word, the most optimistic word in the English language, he thinks, which she released to shake him from a decade-long slumber: *Yes*.

Even now, he can picture himself returning home after that first night, the litany of mutterings as he lay alone in the dark. Then his realisation the next morning, when he

woke to discover that he had not invented her. Now, now, he thought. This changes everything.

He has lost track of the time before her arrival, those days without promise. He has vanished somewhere inside her voice, her slightest gesture, a single raised eyebrow, swivel of the hip as she turns (upstage right) from her parents and launches into song. The way, each night, she inspects her parents' living room for dust, rubbing her fingers along the surface of objects, and then holds those fingers to the light to demonstrate her loathing of their petty lives. Her character's wish to be, always, elsewhere. Perhaps it is that gesture, her dust-checking (he likes to think it is more than just the achievement of an actress entirely in touch with her role), that has given him the idea that elsewhere could be with him.

All along, he has told himself that there would be time to act. Now he must correct himself. There had been time. Before, yes, but time is loosening its grip. He must see her.

He wanders through the streets of Beechworth, stopping to say hello to a group of women who trail behind two children. The boys kick a leather ball. The sound of leather against leather and the boys' shouting are all that he can hear on the otherwise quiet street.

The thought arrives between the familiar sounds of the boys' boots beating against the ball. At first, it is simple, so clear that he wonders why it has eluded him for this long. She is a member of a travelling theatre company. From here, she will leave for another town. There is no mystery in this. It is what she does, what she will continue

to do long after she forgets her stopover in this place whose name she has probably not even bothered to learn.

There are cattle rustlers roaming the surrounding area. If he is discreet, thorough in his upcoming report to the magistrate — if he can outline the immediacy of a scouting mission to learn more about the rustlers' habits and intentions, perhaps even stop them before they strike — his plan may work. He will follow her. From town to town, from performance to performance, he will follow this Julia Matthews while remaining a faithful protector of the good people of Beechworth.

He steps inside the hotel and approaches the first clerk he sees.

I am Inspector Burke, he says. His voice nearly cracks, but the clerk turns immediately to listen. It is of the utmost importance that I speak with the manager of the theatre company.

Yes, the young clerk says, a tinge of nervousness in his voice.

He leads Burke into the adjoining room and points to a bald man sitting alone in the corner. Burke recognises the manager at once, a stooped little figure caressing a kempt beard, unlit pipe hanging from the corner of his mouth. Over the past weeks, the manager has become friendly with the shopkeepers near the station, Burke knows, but this is the first time he has seen him outside the theatre.

On the table are two open ledgers and a cup of coffee, still steaming. Burke hovers, attempting to catch a glimpse of the tangled writing that fills the ledgers, notes that seem to have been written from left to right and then, once the page was complete, from top to bottom.

Burke allows several moments to pass before he clears his throat. The manager removes his pipe and stands.

Oh, he says. Good morning. I didn't see you there.

The manager recognises the persistent theatregoer at once — a good customer, he thinks, this man who has also been pointed out to him as the town's police inspector.

Name's Edward Langley, he says. He turns his palm upward and motions towards an empty chair. Please sit, Inspector.

Burke settles in across from him.

There now, good. Tell me. What can I do for you?

Burke leans over the table, still attempting to read from the open pages. I would like ... I have come, Mr Langley, to offer my services.

The manager lights his pipe. Services? he asks. He closes the ledgers, stacks them one on top of the other and removes them from Burke's view. What kind of services are you offering, Inspector?

Burke glances over Langley's shoulder to survey the room. He leans in, whispering, I can get you safely to the next town. As an escort. His eyes shift about the nearby tables.

An escort? For the first time, as though Burke's anxiety has become contagious, Langley, too, looks nervously around the room.

I'm not sure that I follow you, Inspector.

I have come to offer my protection, Mr Langley.

Pardon? *Protection*, did you say?

Yes, Burke says. With his right hand, he motions for Langley to keep his voice down. I can guarantee that you'll have no (here he pauses, raises his eyebrows) *impediments* along your travels.

Is there something that I, that *we*, should be worried about? Langley asks. Has something happened? His eyes widen, but Burke remains straight-faced. What is

going on here?

Recently there have been, well, some troubles in these parts, Burke says. Several matters are under investigation. I have looked into them personally. I can tell you that these are dangerous times. Dangerous times, indeed.

Langley's face tightens.

It is my obligation to make sure you and all the members of your company have a safe passage from Beechworth to your next destination.

How, Burke wonders, will he get out of this? Now that he has set this lie in motion, it is too late to turn back, to tell Langley that he has changed his mind, that all of this has been a mistake. There is always a certain stage of the game that, even when confident of his hand, he is unable to continue his bluff. Sitting in the lobby of this hotel, he knows that his hands are empty. He holds less than the nothing he concealed inside sweaty palms while in Italy his debt threatened to drown him. Does Langley understand that the air of danger he attempts to release between the two of them, here in such secretive whispers, is utterly false?

I've come to you first, Burke says. No one else in the company knows anything about this. I didn't want to worry them.

Yes, the manager says. I appreciate your discretion, Inspector. I would be most obliged if we could keep this matter to ourselves.

Consider it done, Burke says.

Thank you. Langley contemplates the room, suspicious now of all nearby.

Now there's only one thing left, Burke says.

Is there more? Langley asks.

You haven't said where you will be travelling.

Later that night, he arrives to a crowded theatre. Between the audience's impertinent prattle, Burke can hear the distant rumbling of thunder. Once, similar stirrings would have kept the townspeople hidden safely in their homes. No longer do they let this land dictate their every move. They have been forced to choose. Will they allow themselves to be tamed by this new country and all of its curiosities, or will they plant the seeds of their own traditions in its soil and wait for a more familiar life to take shape?

Several men in the crowd call out to Burke as he walks down the aisle. These greetings he returns with polite nods, quick waves of the hand. He is almost certain that he has seen some of these men here before. Do they recognise him from those previous performances, as well? Have they returned with similar motives as the man who, dressed in full uniform, strides to take his seat in the front row?

These thoughts recede once the curtain parts. He is so involved in the performance, in fact, that he fails to disguise his pleasure at the moment of her entry. He does not bother to lower his voice when she begins her timorous dance, then segues into the first song of innocent childhood concerns. He knows that a woman of such perception would not overlook the heaviness of his gaze, and, on some nights, Burke is almost certain that she has purposefully met his stare when she swivels on her heels, full of the life for which he waits.

How long has she known his intentions? Probably since even before he knew the full extent to which she could lead his passions. Women are sensitive to such things, he knows. Their instinct stretches through the room like tentacles, gauging pulse and pressure. Each stolen glance and furtive gesture affords epics of opportunity or betrayal. Men have waged war over much less.

Throughout this penultimate performance, as in all of the others, Burke sings

along with her. Cheers after each scene when the lights dim and the stage setting changes behind an open curtain, a table placed where a chair had been and suddenly he, if no one else in the audience, is transported to another year, a different city. She is twelve years old, she is twenty. The reality is far greater than any he has ever envisioned.

The moment arrives before he knows it. Over the past weeks, he has given unofficial names to her scenes. This one (Act III, Scene IV) he has come to think of as *The Quarrel*. Her movements are always the same, the only variations in the lilt of her voice. Her vivacity continues to surprise him, as though her intention each night is to surpass the preceding performances. She is awkward, at times graceless. He cannot decide. He cannot locate the exact word or draw an example for what she has done, for the ways she guides him through this scene and to the rift between laughter and tears, humility and pride.

She sits on a wooden chair in the corner while her parents, facing each other on stage right, begin their quarrel. Through the course of these nights, Burke has done little to learn the roles of these other characters. Even so, he can now tell that their fighting is much livelier than before.

This observation prompts questions. At first, they are harmless: do these onstage passions reflect the actors' private lives? At the end of the performance, after they remove their costumes and disappear into the quiet Beechworth night, where do they go, who do they see, what do they do?

Then it comes, out of nowhere: could the man playing her father share Burke's own desires for Julia Matthews? He is handsome, Burke thinks, *even younger than myself*.

A layer of sweat gathers on his chest, under his arms, but he refuses to remove his

jacket. Doing so, to him, would be like shedding a layer of dignity. He adjusts his collar, pulls it from his neck and turns his chin from side to side. Due to this, he nearly misses what happens next. Amidst the cheers that greet the closing notes of her song, someone has approached the stage, a boy, a young man, and laid a rose at Julia's feet. He continues to stand before the stage long after the curtain is drawn. When it opens, several moments later, Julia walks forward and plucks the flower from the floor. With one hand, she holds it to her chest, twirling its stem.

Until tonight, he has not imagined that there could be another, others. He has not imagined the possibility that, all along, they had been sitting near him in the darkened theatre, their thoughts similar to his own. Now his worry swells. How many of them have been walking anonymously through the streets, visiting her backstage all this time while he stood by and refused to act?

He leaves the theatre dejected. Along the empty streets of Beechworth, he sifts through the resin of these past weeks. Since that first performance, he has been nothing more to her than an old man, he tells himself, a lecher perched in the front row. He has failed to make even the slightest gesture after the curtains have closed and show her, as this boy with his rose tonight, of what he is capable.

He makes a pact. After all the money he lost in Italy and the tribulations those losses produced, he cannot stand the thought of incurring another defeat, especially now that the stakes have risen.

Mindless pacing up and down the main street and through its alleyways. In the distance, he hears a cackling, men's voices. He looks up just as they enter the pub across from him, three men he recognises as the father actor and two others, minor characters who also work as stage hands. He crosses the street and follows them inside.

By the time he enters, they have already chosen a small table in the back. Burke walks over to introduce himself.

They eye one another before responding in unison. Evening, Inspector.

Good evening, he says, though unlike his usual greeting the words now emerge garbled. I have seen your show. A number of times. You have done a good thing for Beechworth. You have brought the community together. Many who would never go to the theatre now have had a chance, thanks to you.

The father actor is the first to speak. Fine town you have here, Inspector. We've enjoyed our stay. Never thought we'd like it so much, in fact.

Twenty bloody pubs, mutters the man to his left. Last place we was was only two.

Hear, hear! the other man says, slapping his friend on the shoulder.

In fact, the father actor continues, it's a shame we're off so soon. Seems like we've only just arrived.

That it does, Burke says. That it does.

He detests this habit, this insistence of repeating himself when he has nothing further to offer to the conversation but speaks merely for fear of unshackling silence. He puts his hands in his pockets, rocks uneasily on his heels, and prepares his exit.

Say, why don't you have a seat, Inspector? the father actor says. Name's Samuel. That's George, and he's Philip. The other two men nod.

They drag their chairs over the grimy floor and make room for him at the small table, its top uneven and spotted with pools of wax. Burke shakes his head, but before he has a chance to decline Samuel's offer, Philip pulls a chair beside him.

We were thinking about a game of cards to help us unwind, Samuel says. Now I'd say that you look like a gambling man, Inspector. Care to join us?

Since he left Italy, Burke has done his best to remove himself at the first hint of

such an invitation. Taking up again his vice among men who know Julia is something that he knows he must resist. He tries to remain composed.

Normally, I would accept your offer, he says. Tonight, however, I'm afraid I haven't got any money on me. He slaps at his right pocket to demonstrate his point.

That's no matter, Samuel says. (Is he, Burke wonders, the only one who can speak?) He places his elbows on the table and looks directly at Burke. We'll play for something else.

Burke smiles. What did you have in mind?

Oh, let's see. What should it be, lads? At this, the two others shrug their shoulders. Do you have a good standing in this fine establishment, Inspector? Hey, barkeep! Samuel motions for the barman. Once he gains the man's attention, he says: Can you vouch for the good inspector here?

He looks at Burke, nods coolly to Samuel.

It's getting late, Burke says. I should be going home now.

But you just arrived. Stay awhile. We're just a couple of fellows looking for a little entertainment. What's the harm in that?

I suppose you're right, but still I ...

I see. You've got a missus at home awaiting your return, have you?

Oh, no. No missus for me.

Samuel removes the cards from his pocket. The sound of the shuffling deck, both trauma and euphoria.

Then it's settled, Samuel says.

He cannot win. For the first few hands, he underplays. Then he changes his approach, overcompensates.

Are you sure you understand the rules, Inspector? Samuel asks.

Burke looks up from his concealed hand, his face reddening.

More drinks this way, barkeep, Samuel says.

Seven hands pass, eight. Only now does Burke notice that Philip and George have left the table and lean like drunkards against the bar.

Help me celebrate my lucky streak, will you, Inspector? Samuel lifts his glass and drinks. He slams it on the uneven tabletop and sighs heavily. Now, he says. Where were we?

How long will this company of yours continue travelling? Burke asks.

Another card, please, Inspector. Yes, thank you very much. That's just what I wanted. It's very kind of you to call it *my* company. Let's see. From here we're off to — Oh, would you look at that hand! And then —

Samuel comes to an abrupt stop. He lays his cards on the table and looks at Burke. Why do you ask, Inspector? Thinking of running off with us, are you? Thinking of putting down that pistol for a fake one? Is that it?

No, no. I've never thought of acting.

No? Never? Are you sure about that? I'd have considered it your true calling. More so than doing whatever it is that you do, that is, but that's another story, I'm sure, and we just have to make do sometimes. But with your skills. That voice. Gold, I tell you. Gold! You'd be a fool not to travel with that show of yours. Samuel draws a card from the top of the deck and lays it before Burke's trembling hands.

So. He knows. And if this man knows, then Julia must know, as well. Is he the laughing stock of the entire company? he wonders. Do they end each performance and hurry backstage to trade tales about the man in the uniform who sings from the front row? How many others like him have there been along their travels?

Burke stands, shoving the chair from the table more forcefully than he intended. It appears that my card-playing skills aren't what they once were, he says. One grows rusty out here. I do thank you for a pleasant evening, Samuel, but now I must be leaving.

I haven't offended you, have I, Inspector? You must forgive me if I did. I didn't mean anything by —

Burke raises his hand, palm out. Not at all, he says. It's late. I must be getting home.

He pulls on his coat.

Stay awhile, Inspector. Just one more round.

It was nice to have met you, Samuel, but —

We'll change the stakes. We'll make it more to your liking.

My liking? What did you have in mind this time? Burke asks.

If you win this one ... Pardon me, Samuel says, resisting laughter. But if you win this one, I'll tell you what you've been meaning to ask all night.

And what is that?

I'll tell you which is hers.

Hers? Burke asks, trying to suppress his unease.

Her dressing room, man. Now, sit down.

Afterwards, he shows no surprise. He offers no sign of pleasure upon winning two of three hands and then — when Samuel proposed a new series, best of seven — four in a row. In his half-drunken elation, Burke never questions whether the actor played to lose.

The first touch of light tints the pub's windows. They are sitting around the table,

drinking like old friends who have settled back into familiar comforts, when Burke reminds Samuel of his promise.

What?

Burke pushes an ace of diamonds across the table. Here, he says.

What are you after, Inspector? Another round? Burke shakes his head. What, then? I want you to draw it for me. What are you talking about? I want you to draw a map to Julia's dressing room.

HE IS QUIET, he is eager to please. These are the things the natives remember from King's previous life among them, when he was one of many white men who set up camp on the creek and would not leave. They watched him closely, then. They remember.

That he had been smaller than the others, detached and gentle. That he assumed the life of a woman, cooking and cleaning, mending for a master whose beard was long and eyes the colour of the cloudless sky. The pistol that was never far from that man's reach. This smaller man, now returned to them, always by his leader's side, waiting.

A group of four women huddle over him and point to his pale chest. He struggles to pull himself upright. The one closest to him places the battered hat to his head. It has stretched in these past months, and now he must pull it back in order to see from beneath its brim. He tugs the hat down until it covers his eyes, his nose, then removes it with a flourish to reveal himself to the smiling natives.

How quickly they lose him. One moment, he laughs, the next, he is gone. Where?

Fallen back into the vast loneliness of his life between tribes, his and their own.

Later, crouched beside the fire, he sees her approach. Karuwa. Her hands cup a hidden object. She sits beside him, moistens the paste with her tongue before rolling it in her palm and offering it to him. *Nardoo*, she says, and he repeats the word. The way her eyes smile as he mistakes one word for another, much as he smiles when her hands fumble across his body in the night.

Throughout the day, he eats this nardoo, but her food does not satisfy his hunger. She places the root and a portion of the paste she makes from it beside the leather pouch that contains his pistol and the other items that Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills asked him to hold. Inside, he knows, are journals and letters, enough weight to hinder his progress before he arrived here and set the pouch down in a corner of the camp where he hoped to forget about its contents, unopened, untouched.

There are times when he thinks of burying these journals and letters here, in the middle of the native camp. At other times, he wants to return them to the womb of the tree along with the things they left behind, that place where everything went wrong. He knows he will never look upon, never read what those men have written, all the things that they have asked him to carry in their absence.

King lays the pistol on the ground before him and waits for them to gather. Once he has their attention, he points skyward to a crow whose screeches compete with a baby's cries. He places his fingers in his mouth, first without the nardoo, and then with a handful of the mush, though he prefers when the woman, Karuwa, the one who comes to him each night, her body rising and falling over his, does this for him. This desert intimacy. His reason to go on. Two months before — or was it five or nine? — a similar mush passed from his hands onto Burke's tongue. Then it was King who

moistened the root. Last rites, communion in the desert.

Pistol in hand, he sets off. Several men and children trail shortly behind. He approaches a small clearing and turns to them, points to the half-dozen crows pecking around the base of a tree. With his free hand, he motions for the natives to halt. They huddle close to the earth. King creeps closer to the birds, aiming, firing the shiny god that explodes in his hand and whose noise slaughters.

Most of the birds scatter at once, all but one. Their screeches of terror and taunt.

Each afternoon, this ritual. He sets off, and they follow with caution. They return with the birds, sometimes as many as seven or eight, each the size of a small dog. The natives wait while he prepares a fire. When he finishes, he pulls at the cooked meat with his knife, carries it from one end of the camp to the next, offers it up to them.

THE NEXT NIGHT, he walks in front of the stage and proceeds towards his usual spot, only to discover that it has been taken. For a moment, he scowls at its occupant. Is it the boy from the previous night, the one who tastelessly dropped a rose at Julia's feet?

Burke moves up the aisle. The few empty seats he finds are in the back. He chooses one in the middle, between two families. Children kick on either side. Their clothes are nearly threadbare, their voices shrill, but at this moment he has no other option than to excuse himself and sit between them.

Through the first scenes, the children question, on appearance, the identity of each new character. Who is he? one or the other wants to know. Why is that woman singing?

The questions, at first easy to answer, soon turn more complex. Are they in England? Is that what London looks like?

For the first time, the children's queries leave him stumped. Is *this* what England looks like? That corner of the world has slipped from his memory. Light, the slant of rain, rock and water. All that makes one place different from another.

Their questions cease the moment Julia appears. It is as simple as that, her arrival. With this glowing-haired girl they sense a private bond. Her bright clothes fit perfectly. She is not as old as their parents, not ancient. She is not someone who would be oblivious to their thoughts and needs. Nor is she their age, unknowing, a child pushed always to the periphery. At once, they seem to accept that she possesses knowledge of their lives that even they, aged six through ten, have not yet fathomed, though she is exactly the kind of woman they imagine themselves becoming.

Should he turn, now, to inform them that she will soon be his?

The light that precedes certain people, privilege that comes not from ethic or work

but instead from presence alone, as though beauty were her greatest talent. Some will say it is all she has. Beauty like some hard-earned achievement. She knows the range of its effects. If necessary, she is prepared to hold it over everyone she meets.

The performance continues. Instead of singing along with Julia one last time, Burke twitches in his seat. Then, long before the curtain closes, he excuses himself. He steps over the kicking legs, these children who have fallen under a different spell, though it is cast by the same enchantress.

He leaves the theatre and walks to the back of the building, rubbing the ace of diamonds in his pocket. He cannot bear the thought of being stopped, his intentions questioned. Even more so, he cannot stand to see his competition, the boy from last night who has most likely returned with another flower, perhaps an entire bouquet, for his final admission of ardour. Burke will not be the one to deny her such minor pleasures, should she be charmed by them. But could she truly believe that this boy is prepared to offer her everything, as he is tonight?

The door creaks open. The smell of paint, freshly cut wood. Muffled cheering seeps through the walls. Except for the light that spills through the cracks in the door, it is too dark to see his feet. He closes his eyes, presses his hands against the walls. In this manner, he begins to feel his way to her.

Soon the applause fades and is replaced by the sounds of shuffling bodies, occasional murmurs. Beside him flow the first actors and actresses, a handful of others dressed in work clothes. They pass on either side without acknowledging his presence. In mid-step, they congratulate one another, their talk of a much-needed drink, one last item to purchase from the general store before they leave in the morning. There are pats on the back, half-hearted hugs between women who do not slow their pace as they rush towards their lives.

Among this commotion, there is no sign of her. He could not have planned it better, he thinks. When he steps into her real life, he does not want her to be in character. He wants to make sure that she has time to discard the role of the spoiled child he has grown to love in place of her own spirit, the essence that he has come to uncover, tonight, once and for all.

Burke pulls the ace of diamonds from his pocket and reviews Samuel's map. He studies the card from one angle, turns it over, retracing his steps until he reaches the door, her door. He presses his ear against the thin wood. From the other side come two voices, occasional laughter. Of the talk inside, he can distinguish little, though he hears enough to know that the discussion circles around the other actors. Whose performance was best, who forgot her lines. He could stand here forever and listen to this talk, but he knows that he must go through with it.

If she has already spoken to Samuel, the actor-gambler whom she runs to each night on stage, crying, *Father*, then she will know everything. And if she has understood his intentions all along, then she has hid that knowledge well. Recognising when to slacken the line, how to keep him in pursuit. All of the elements of her seduction.

He knocks softly against the door, too softly to compete with the noises that fill the hallway. Nothing comes of it. He tries again, two quick raps of his knuckles. His hand is poised for the third knock when the door opens, and for the briefest moment he thinks he sees her standing before him. But it is not her. The woman before him, even on her best day, does not deserve to stand in Julia's shadow, he thinks, the taste in his mouth bitter.

It is the one who plays Julia's mother on stage. Upon seeing Burke at the door, she smiles, but he sees the mistake long before she does: he has come to her room. Each

night, he has sat in the audience to watch her and not the much younger woman who plays her daughter. He backs away without apologising, the actress's smile fading as she slumps against the doorframe.

Where did he go wrong? He draws the card from his pocket once again and turns it around. He moves unsteadily down the hallway until he comes to the door.

Mrs Matthews has lodged her body in the doorframe so that her daughter will not be troubled by any uninvited visitors. Hands behind his back, Burke stands before her. He has forgotten to wipe his brow before knocking, and now it is too late.

Good evening, he says, his voice like a sigh.

Mrs Matthews offers no response. She identifies him as the man who has sat each night in the front row of her daughter's audience. Except for tonight, when he was not there, in that place where she had come to expect him, and for a moment she felt a sense of loss. She continues to look him over in distaste. Her eyes travel up and down the stitching and fabric of his uniform, as though she is searching for lint, something for the two of them, mother and daughter, to later criticise.

At last, she looks him in the eye. Can I help you, sir?

Burke removes his hat and bows at the waist. I am here to speak with Muzz Matthews, he says.

It comes out wrong, the pronunciation harsher than he intended.

She fakes a smile. But *I* am Mrs Matthews, she says, failing to replicate his accent. What would you like to speak with *me* about?

He will let her play her game. What option does he have? After all, she is closer to his own age than he is to Julia's. This role of overprotective mother that, unlike her daughter, a professional, she is unable to discard.

He steps closer, half a step, forcing the woman to yield several precious inches of

threshold. It is just enough for him to see Julia's reflection in the mirror. She sits at a small table. After a moment of silence, she turns a powdered cheek.

Who is it, Mother? Who is there?

The voice, deep and experienced, is not what he has expected. It is not at all the high-pitched voice that she employs on stage. Mrs Matthews opens the door enough for Julia to see him: Robert O'Hara Burke, sweaty and stooped, the stems of two roses protruding from behind his left elbow. His eyes are pale and sleepy, his forehead high. If questioned, she could be persuaded into admitting that she remembers him from that day on the street when she had wanted to speak to him. But even after all those nights of seeing him in her audience, she is surprised by his size.

Oh, Julia says. It's you.

At first, he is not sure how to take this. Simple words with multiple meanings, depending on where the stress falls. Nervousness erupts in his left cheek and causes his scar to quiver.

Don't make our poor guest wait outside, Mother. Then the voice returns, the one he has come to know so well. Let Mr Burke in.

Julia points to a small sofa. Please, she says. Have a seat. Mother, would you please ask Mr Burke if he would like a cup of tea.

Mrs Matthews puts her hands on her hips.

That, Burke says, would be lovely.

He sits before them and reaches for the cup, its handle too small for his finger to fit through, so he grips it from the bottom, as he would clutch a ball. He takes a sip. The tea drips to his chin.

Muzz Matthews, he begins. Again, the mistake. The accent that recurs,

unexpectedly, like an alternate personality. Both women look up at once. Miss Matthews, he repeats, softening his voice as he turns to Julia. I have come to tell you ... Abruptly, he stops, takes another sip of tea in order to steady himself. I have come to tell you how much I have enjoyed your show these past weeks.

Well, that's very kind of you to say, Mr Burke, Julia says. But it isn't *my* show.

I think that many in the audience would disagree with you about that, he says.

You just wait and see, her mother says. Soon it will be your show, Julia.

Burke nods in agreement, eyes focused on the tiny cup in his hand. He rests it on the saucer balanced on his lap. Yes, he says. That's absolutely correct. In fact, I should know.

Oh? Julia says. How's that, Mr Burke?

I'm a bit of a theatre man, myself.

Is that so?

When I was in Italy (he pauses, waits to see what response this information elicits), I attended the theatre frequently. I have seen many shows. Many shows, indeed. Again the teacup rises unsteadily to his lips.

Over the rim of his cup he watches as Mrs Matthews turns, eyebrows raised, to Julia.

It's a pity that you'll be leaving us, Miss Matthews.

About time, if you ask me, her mother says.

Mother! Julia turns to her mother, scowls, and then looks at Burke once again. A pity? Why do you say that, sir?

Well, Burke says. You've been here —

Two weeks, Mrs Matthews says. More than long enough to get to know this dreadful place.

You see, Burke continues, now leaning closer to Julia, I haven't had the chance to make your acquaintance.

This revelation, which causes the mother to rise to her feet, makes Julia blush. He knows this is no act. He has seen the way she feigns embarrassment, excitement on stage, and this is not it. Her colouring, at this moment, is altogether different from what he has memorised in these past weeks.

Mrs Matthews clears her throat. She turns her back on them and approaches the door. It's been a long day, Mr Burke, and my daughter needs her rest. Now I'll have to ask you to —

Mother!

That's enough, Julia, she says, her back still turned to the two of them.

Mother!

Not another word from you, she says. As her palm settles on the door handle, she turns, at last, to face them. And what she sees maddens her into silence. Burke, on bended knee. Julia's bare hand concealed inside his own. A single tear swimming through the crevice of his scar.

To Mrs Matthews, he is just like the rest of them, those men she has been warned against, the ones who would come backstage to call on her daughter for the simple reason that she is an actress, as though Julia's profession means they can take certain liberties better left unspoken. There was the previous one, she thinks, that young doctor in Ballarat, but he was a gentleman, not at all like this mere police inspector who waltzed backstage to kneel before her daughter.

Moments after she swept Burke from the room, they had their first fight in weeks.

I don't believe you, Julia said, over and over again, to which her mother asked, at first calmly, then less so: What are you saying, Julia? Are you telling me that you

wanted him to stay?

Why not, Mother?

I can't believe you would even listen to such a man, much less prolong his company. And what did he say to you? What did that dreadful man say to you, Julia?

He said ...

What, Julia?

He said that he could make me happy.

But you're already happy.

He said that he could make me happy ...

Yes? Out with it!

Happy in *marriage*, Mother.

And for the second time that night, Mrs Matthews found herself unable to speak.

At least they are leaving, she thinks, lying in bed later that night. At least he waited until the final performance to come around and knock on their door and offer her daughter *a happy life*. Were those really his words? She knows her daughter's powers over men. She was the one who helped Julia cultivate them. She tries to think ahead, two years from now, to a time when this episode will make them laugh, but on this night she finds no solace from Burke's performance, the large and awkward man on bended knee who fixed his eyes on Julia *without looking twice at me*.

What comes next, what always follows their rows: the period of brooding in which they refuse to be in one another's company. Each will wait for the other to correct her mistake, to announce her misdeed like a change in weather.

He is an old man, she wants to tell Julia. He is twice your age. You will meet a

nice young man, just like I have always promised. (And what she thinks but does not say: like that young doctor in Ballarat.) When you do, I will not stand in the way. I am not at all the controlling monster that you make of me.

Odd, this dance of competitiveness at the appearance of an outsider. Its first moments of reprieve bring them together as though nothing has ever come between them.

But Julia has made her decision. Once she has left a thought to temper in the flames of her fury, Mrs Matthews knows, there will be no turning back. Her daughter is, has always been (and it surprises her that no critic has thought to write this yet) nothing less than a force of nature.

All that morning, as the company prepares for departure, Mrs Matthews expects to see him. Someone who has shown such consistency will not go away easily, she thinks. Again, she considers his age. Could he be older than herself? And for another moment, she allows herself to imagine just that: the two of them. Not him with Julia, but him with *me*.

There is, after all, something quite dashing about him: his wavy hair, those pale blue eyes, his sturdy build. It was that, his physical presence, in particular, that Mrs Matthews would focus on each night when he entered the theatre. Just three nights before, when peeking from behind the curtain to note the attendance, she watched as he paraded down the aisle to claim his regular seat. She cannot deny it. She had gone wobbly at the knees.

Waiting outside the hotel, she berates herself for these thoughts. How could she have overlooked his intentions? She has seen Julia's show two dozen times. After the second rehearsal, she had trouble staying awake. Did she truly believe that he enjoyed the story and its mediocre performances? That he came for those moments when the

curtains parted and she, a married woman, stood, watching him? Not jealousy, Mrs Matthews tells herself, not that.

As much as he wanted to see Julia one last time, Burke knew that it was best to leave last night's impressions alone. Let them take root at her bedside. Give her time to nurture them, all of the details that will someday construct a life. Only then will she begin to miss him. Only then will she understand the appeal of his offer.

By mid-morning, the members of the company are seated and ready to move on to Castlemaine, all but Mrs Matthews, who stands outside the hotel, still awaiting Burke's arrival. If he could have seen the surprise on her face when, as a last-minute decision, he sent two of his men to escort the theatre company to its next location, then he would have understood that his plan had already begun to work.

WE HAVE LOST time, Howitt says, time that we must now regain, and Welch nods, as though this were some skill he learned long ago and was delighted to employ.

They head for Menindee, where they will unlock Burke's stores and inspect the supplies that he left behind and select what is worth carrying into the desert.

Once there, Welch proceeds to the farthest structure. He wants to sift through its contents alone, without interference. He wants time to review these items, not in order to see what is at the rescue party's disposal but instead to discover what Burke chose to disregard, all the things this will say about the man. If he cannot assemble Burke by his actions, Welch thinks, then he will do so by piecing together the evidence of the man's incompetence.

He stands in the middle of the storeroom, scrutinising the shelves that rise from floor to ceiling and whose contents conceal the four walls. More crates and unpacked equipment lie scattered across the floor. To get to the shelves, Welch crawls over the crates, nearly losing his balance. He pushes aside several bottles of lime juice. On this shelf alone, there are no less than twenty bottles in front of two dozen boxes of lard. On the next shelf are a dozen spools of fishing line, six tins filled with hooks. Below are rows of medicine, three, four rows, a dozen enema kits. He is inspecting a wall of unworn boots when he hears Vinning behind him. He turns to find the man standing in the doorway.

My God, Vinning says, then repeats himself, and to this litany all Welch can do is stare.

The first sign comes in the next week: a rope suspended from a tree. Welch rides beneath it, rubs the frayed edges with his fingers before giving it a firm tug. The rope slithers out of the branch. In one hand, he holds it, the reins of the horse in the other. With the frayed end of the rope, he slaps at his thigh while progressing onward to

survey the land for other disturbances.

Two days pass. Nothing. Early afternoon, the following day. He is riding alone when he sees a flash of light, quick in the deepening dusk. He gets off his horse, coaxes the spotted animal forward.

The first thing he notices is the pan. It is turned upside down, half-buried in the sandy soil. It is not what he saw a moment ago. The location is wrong. Yet he moves closer. Within five paces, behind one large rock and placed atop another, smaller one that seems to have been used as a table, he finds a pile of bullet casings, two tin mugs. At first, he does not notice the shirt hanging from a nearby tree.

He gathers these items and packs them. Into the closest tree, he engraves several marks with his knife. Howitt will want to know where he found these things.

Later that night at the camp, Welch learns that the others have made similar discoveries.

It's as though someone dumped a munitions box in the middle of the bush, Aitkin says.

I found two pairs of underwear, Vinning says.

Oh, this is good, Aitkin says.

How's that?

All we have to do now is look for men who aren't wearing any underwear.

Through their banter, Brahe remains quiet. He sits off to the side, drinking from his cup of tea. And farther away, out of earshot, Howitt rifles through the day's findings, clothes and cookery, empty bottles of medicine and leather bags, wondering what has happened here. Where was the order? Then: it's as though there had never been any order at all.

THESE ARE THE days when the tribe begins to turn its back on him. Each time King draws near, ready to offer his services around the camp, they gesture annoyance over his proximity. At the end of the day, he sets the dead birds at their feet. Later, he watches as they prepare the fires, no longer sending the leftover meat to him but leaving it beside the stones for him to retrieve once they finish.

Most nights she still comes for him. Karuwa. If he were to guess the meaning of her name — if he were to teach this language to another traveller who washed onto these shores — he would explain it as follows: Karuwa, she who heals with hands and tongue. The only joke he has been able to form in the gestures of their language. It is, he thinks, a joke that Charley Gray would have appreciated. King shares it with her on the nights she comes to him, the sheen of her hipbones, damp with his sweat in the moonlight.

Seasons turn, one into another. Her body falling into his, their soft moans filling the night to replace one history with another until he is no longer recognisable to himself in the water's reflection, the blade of his knife. He has become an observer of skies. There are days when all he wants to do is watch the clouds float towards a place that was once home, a place that tugs like a current against his memory.

He has been with the tribe for one month. He has been with the tribe for one year.

HIS HANDS CANNOT move fast enough. He has been composing this story in his head for nearly a week, altering the details, sealing the holes to keep it afloat. As though from one lie, he can create a truth greater than truth. By the time Burke finishes, he is unsure what is real, what fabrication.

At the last minute, he makes another change. All along, he has written that the agitators have been cattle rustlers. Wasn't he supposed to have already taken care of that? With a slight movement of his hand, these cattle rustlers become horse thieves. The warning, he writes, came from a miner who was passing through Beechworth and had seen firsthand the thieves and (he grins as he lowers this detail into the vessel of his story) their aggressive eyes. He will ride out in reconnaissance. Only in this way can he eliminate the problem before it occurs. He will take action and put his own life at risk before any of the citizens under his protection are forced to suffer, full stop.

There is one thing he must do. He stands aside and watches as the shopkeeper turns carefully through the catalogue, his fingers darkening with ink.

After several pages, Burke jabs his index finger onto the half-turned page. That is it, he says. That is the one.

This one? the shopkeeper asks.

Yes. That is the one I want.

The shopkeeper turns from Burke to look at the price. It is a fine choice, he says. A fine choice, indeed.

He arrives on Saturday, two hours before Julia's second performance in Castlemaine. Through thin rain, he walks to the theatre and approaches the stage manager. Into the man's hand, he presses an envelope with her name written on the front.

In the letter, he has written four things: he has come to see her perform, *to hear your voice, which I have longed for*. He will be sitting in the front row, as usual. Then

he asks when they can meet. *Only the two of us.* And the final item, the most important: *Do you have an answer for me yet?*

Throughout the performance, she displays a certain awareness, agility that he does not remember from her days in Beechworth. She has changed her character's manner of delivery, her facial expressions more whimsical than before.

After the show, Burke arrives backstage to find Mrs Matthews standing in front of the closed door, arms crossed. At his smile, her face does not soften. This confirms his worst fears. Getting through to her will be even more difficult than he once thought. Not since he returned to his regiment in Italy has he felt so powerless, his ability to charm an audience mislaid somewhere in the scrub country.

He smiles once again. Please tell Miss Matthews how much I enjoyed her performance, he says. He steps back from her and walks away as though their exchange had been pleasant.

Again, the next night, she stands outside Julia's door waiting for him. He goes through the same motions, this time with a slight alteration: I would be most obliged if you would tell Miss Matthews how much I enjoyed her performance.

The woman braces herself before the door.

As Burke turns and begins to leave, she speaks.

Miss Matthews is tired. She has a busy schedule and will not have time for any visitors. She will certainly not have time for such visitors as yourself, Mr Burke. I think you should go back to Beechworth or Ireland or wherever it is that you came from. It would be best for everyone. She narrows her eyes and extends her arm in the direction of the exit.

On the third night, he goes backstage before the performance begins. This time, the dressing-room door is open. He finds Julia sitting before a mirror, hands buried

inside the thick curls of her blonde wig. She sees him in the mirror, his long body filling the doorway, and rushes to him. With his arms, he enfolds her. Besides that first night when he held her hand and, on bended knee, made promises of their future, it is this touch he would like to remember as the beginning.

Mother is away, she says. I've been sending her out for things I forgot. On purpose. The arc of her single raised eyebrow. I was hoping that you would come. We have only a minute. She grabs his hand, bites the corner of her lip. Come with me. She places the back of her hand on his neck. You are warm, she says. Are you unwell?

Yes, he says. Then: No. I am fine. I am happy to see you. He takes her hands, places them between his own hands. Closes his eyes and draws her fingertips to his cheek.

I have an idea, she says.

Later that night, he sits under the soft light of a single candle and composes the letter. From three pages, he cuts it to two, then one. Believing to have reached the greatest effect, he then settles on a single paragraph. The tone is cold. It is exactly what she has asked of him.

Dear Miss Matthews,

I have no choice but to return to Beechworth. You are a wonderful actress. You will have a fine career, I am certain, one that I will follow from afar.

Yours affectionately,

Robert O'Hara Burke

She is reading the letter, a tear in her eye, when her mother comes

for her later that night.

What is it, Julia? What has happened?

Julia reveals the letter. Mrs Matthews reads it twice before commenting.

Well, I didn't think your inspector would be so feeble. *This*, she says, her hand nearly shaking, is exactly what I warned you against. You should learn to trust my instinct about such matters.

Which provides little reprieve for Julia's distress. Her sobs increase. She shakes her head, places her head in her hands.

It is better this way, her mother says.

Julia turns away. Even she, with all of her talent, cannot hold off the beginning of the smile tickling the corners of her mouth.

He waits two days. When he returns to town, the first person he sees is the father actor, Samuel.

Well, if it isn't my good man. How are you, good man?

Before Burke can turn down a side street, pretending he hasn't heard, Samuel has stepped beside him. Though it is early morning, Burke detects alcohol on Samuel's breath.

What are you doing so far from Beechworth, my good man?

Burke shrugs. He mentions business, alludes, briefly, to the rumours of horse thieves, which, lately, even he has come to believe.

I see, Samuel says, grabbing a pole to steady himself. Hiding out here, are they? Can I offer my services? I have just the right costume. In the meantime, how about a drink?

I'm sorry, Burke says, but I must be going.

Stay awhile.

Thank you, but —

Samuel grabs Burke by the shoulders. Wait, he says. I have news. News about your — after these slurred words, a burp — your intended.

My intended? Burke asks.

You heard me. Now the least you can do is offer to buy me breakfast.

They sit in a darkened corner, Burke listening to Samuel's stories about the most recent performances. Each time he mentions Julia, Samuel looks up from his food and awaits Burke's reaction. Once his plate is empty, he asks whether Burke plans to eat. He has not had much of an appetite since that first night at the Beechworth theatre a month ago, his clothes no longer tight around his waist. And there will be no talk, he understands, until Samuel has had his fill.

Burke slides his plate forward.

Wouldn't mind if you got more bread for us, Samuel says.

To hurry things, Burke steps away from the table, asks for another loaf.

You were saying? he asks upon return.

Saying?

About my ... about Miss Matthews.

Oh, yes. Julia. I'd nearly forgotten.

What do you have to tell me, Samuel?

It's the mother you need worry about.

He wants to reach out and grab the actor by the collar.

As I say, the mother is the one needs convincing. Julia has been walking around a bit helpless of late. She even forgot some of her lines last night. Couldn't believe it,

myself. She's done some things, your Julia, but never *that*. I had to make do, but what with my skills the scene came out for the better, I'd judge.

So, then. He has caused her to forget her lines. He has already written the letter. He has done his part. As for Julia, she has agreed to sneak from her room once her mother has fallen asleep. They will meet outside the hotel, where Burke now waits. Save for the whirling of a persistent southerly, the streets are hushed. He paces back and forth along the building's front. He will wait here and she will come to him. A simple plan.

Simple but for one thing. What if Mrs Matthews has seen through it all? He leans against a column near the hotel entrance and tries to relax after these thoughts. Perhaps her mother has decided to stay up later than usual. Perhaps she has seen through their plan all along. He imagines the possibilities, unrolls the list of reasons for Julia's delay.

The later it gets, the more severe his worries grow. The script, he fears, has been altered. What has been a comedy of errors turns to pure drama. Her plan, asking him to write the letter, has been nothing less than a ruse. He will wait and she will not come. It will end with him standing here, alone. She has made a pawn of him. She has sacrificed him with her skill, convincing him that he was deserving, calling him to hold his head high, while all along she knew the outcome of this tale. She has weighed each move with great skill, and he has fallen for it, for all of it.

If this anger, this disgust at how low he has sunk, is what finally calls him to act, then he must prepare himself. The longer he waits, the lower he will sink in his own estimation, in hers as well. Surely, Julia will not want a man who runs away at the first sign of her mother's presence. There must be something else, he thinks, something greater. Something he can do that she — they — will not be able to ignore.

One week passes, another. He is at home in Beechworth when he hears a knock on his front door. Outside stand several men dressed in coats and ties, one with a notepad in his hand. This man wears a moustache much too wide for his thin face. Behind him are three others who warm their hands in the morning chill.

Are you Robert O'Hara Burke? the first man asks.

Burke nods.

I'll need you to sign here. He pushes the papers into Burke's hands and then steps, uninvited, into the house. So, he says, looking around the small, cluttered room. Where do you want it?

After a long battle during which Burke struggles to retain his patience, the man with the notepad tunes the instrument. Once the tuner and the other men leave, Burke sits and begins to play: *Playing recklessly while thinking of her*, wondering what charges he would lay against himself for behaving in this way. For this reason, he does not hear the knock on the door. Several minutes pass. The knocking continues to compete with Burke's song — the first one Julia sings, the one he learned during her second performance.

The man outside turns from the door and continues to a side window. Through it, he sees Burke at the piano, his eyes closed. He knocks against the windowpane.

Burke opens his eyes. For a moment, he prepares to unleash his fury at this interruption, the tuner returned for no good reason at all, he is sure.

It's all fine, he shouts as he opens the door, but to his surprise it is not the tuner who stands before him.

Robert O'Hara Burke?

Burke stares as though he hasn't understood the question.

Are you Robert O'Hara Burke? the man asks again.

What is it that you want?

It seems you have some powerful friends, he says. I'll be needing you to accompany me to Melbourne. We must leave as soon as possible.

It will have to wait, Burke says.

These are not the kind of men who you ask to wait, Mr Burke.

Men who cannot wait for me are no friends of mine.

Everything will be explained in due course. Now if you will pack a few things, we can leave tonight.

Burke shakes his head. I can't leave tonight.

We need to leave tonight, Mr Burke. These men —

Go back to Melbourne. Tell my friends, whoever they are, that I have a prior engagement.

Later that night, another knock at the door. It begins softly, a second instrument entering the fabric of Julia's song. What begins as gentle tapping, a welcome accompaniment, soon rises, throwing Burke off -key. Frustrated, he stops. He listens for the tapping, follows it to the front door. The man from earlier, he thinks. He should have been firmer, made it clear that he will change his plans for no one. He opens the door, only to find Corrigan shivering in his nightclothes. Corrigan, his closest neighbour, the one he nearly arrested several weeks earlier, the charge of riding furiously through town while intoxicated.

Before the man has a chance to speak, Burke remembers. He throws his arms open wide. I hear congratulations are in order, he says.

Corrigan nods. A baby girl.

Burke smiles. I believe this calls for a drink. Come in.

Corrigan doesn't move. A baby girl who's quite good of hearing, Robert.

He strips his bed and removes the curtains from the two front windows. On his hands and knees, he searches through unopened crates, looking for any other articles of fabric that will suit his purpose. A pile rises in the middle of the living room, from which Burke gathers, first, the smallest pieces. He stuffs pillows inside, lays old shirts atop the strings. With the larger sheets and blankets, he covers other exposed segments. The piano now wrapped like an oversized mummy.

It is the feeling, not the sound itself, but the vibrations against his ear and cheek that he is after. The touch of sound. He will place his ear to the lid, lower his body into the currents of its elegant quivering. He will do whatever he can to draw her out of this music and back to him.

Later that night, after he has crawled under the instrument to inspect it, tugging at loose pieces of cloth and stuffing others inside, after he has sat back in silence and observed the change of his creation, he is ready to begin.

He sits on the stool, lifts the creaking lid. His fingers hesitate over the keys before he plays slowly, softly, enticing her essence from the depths of his memory. Above this noise, in a different key, the Corrigan baby cries. Burke at the piano does not hear her. And so he continues, singing along with Julia. Between the songs from her play, he composes something new, not bothering to notate the strands of this music, their very first duet.

He is well out of Beechworth by sunrise the next morning. There are still three performances before she moves on. He will be discreet. He will leave a letter for her at the hotel.

Her own letter, sealed but not addressed, arrives for him during intermission. He walks outside to read it.

It is scribbled, two lines of nearly illegible writing. *I am happy you came. Where were you? We have much to discuss. Mother knows you are here.*

That is all. No sign of when it will be safe for them to meet. Still the first sentence, *I am happy you came*, will be enough. He holds the note to the moonlight, his fingers tracing the bottom of the page, its single letter which appears larger than the others: C.

I am your Cupid. The words she spoke when they saw each other after that first time in the dressing room, when he got down on one knee and asked her to marry him. The way she looked at him as she spoke, eyes more sincere than he thought possible. He didn't have the heart to tell her that she understood so little, that Cupid was only an instigator. That she was, is, much more. Yes, he thought, you started this. You, the messenger, the object, the beginning and the middle and the end.

This time, he waits for her on the side of the stage when she exits after her final scene. He reaches for her gloved hand.

Tonight, I have no fever, he says.

For a moment, she remains still. She blushes, a victory he is more than happy to seize.

Tell me where to wait, he says. Tell me what to do.

She holds his hand for a moment longer, the crowd rising behind her. Here, she says, wait right here, as her hand slips from his and she glides back onto the stage for one final bow.

There are some nights whose stirrings linger inside of us, smells and colours, faint noises that return at unexpected moments. We walk down a quiet street and hear a

door close in the distance, the life inside. There are moments that contain years. Allowing ourselves to forget, outside the tremor of that moment, all that comes between — the hours and days — enables us to hover just beneath the surface of our lives. Such moments reappear on a command beyond our control. If there is an art to waiting, Burke thinks as he watches Julia bow, it is nothing less than the art of being human.

Despite his musical background, he has never been one to think in sounds, though he often wonders what it must be like to do so. He has always been more driven by sight, and for that reason he finds it easy to burn the colours and angles of this night into his memory, not an ocean, not a river (for then we would never be able to step twice into the same memory), more of an oxbow, its waters of varying degrees, all the layers of his life suspended in front of him as though on an endless plain, landscape without end. We add and take away. We throw back the memories we do not want or need. But somewhere, they remain hidden, ready to be called forth, released.

Out of the crowd's blur, she comes to him.

Two weeks slip by. Nights at the piano, nights that he inhabits with her songs. If he cannot have her, if she must continue to travel, then he knows that the only thing he can do is keep her close through this music, her music.

A knock on the door. He glances to his bed, sees the sheet and blanket that, in the cold night, he removed from the instrument's belly. He walks to the door, preparing his apology. This time it is not Corrigan. It is the other one, the one who tried to take him from his new piano and drag him to the city. Several others stand on either side of him. Members of the Committee, men whose portraits Burke has seen at the Club.

Macadam is the first to speak.

Robert, he says, and Burke understands that everything is falling into place.

WILLS'S FIRST THOUGHT, once he returns to Ballarat, is that she planned it all. If he had not allowed himself to grow soft in her company, if he would have removed himself from emotion and examined his dilemma as an outsider, as his readings have instructed, then he would have seen Julia Matthews for the distraction she has become, and none of this would have happened. He would not, before he met her, have made such a mistake. He would not have failed to see Catherwood and his expedition for what they were.

The days pass. He works in the medical tent with his father, ten, twelve hours of listening to patients complain then examining their ailments, bad luck, they say, which has run from the goldmines to their very bones. During these hours, he pushes aside thoughts of her. As soon as the day ends, all patients seen and treated, it comes back — the vision that, despite his resistance, he continually calls forth: Julia's body swaying to a melody of her own making, a song she had sung once, on stage, and which he now hums along with her. Julia's feet tapping against the wooden floor as she glides towards the burning candles. She cups her hand on the side of each candle, glances back at him for a moment before she presses her lips together and blows, extinguishing the flames. Shadows fall across the room.

In a different light, he thinks, all things become new. Her fingers against his lips. The rustle of her clothes in the dark.

He works side by side with his father in the tent and, most nights, the two sleep in cots placed against opposite walls, their bodies turned respectfully away from one another. Before dawn, William wakes to walk the streets of Ballarat, the morning chill invigorating as he embarks on his daily excursion, boots skimming through the mud in this hour when he can be alone with his own thoughts, before he must devote his

mind and body to the needs of others.

In the warm glow of the tent, the Ballarat sky turning from grey to white to blue, he sits with his elbows propped on the table's edge, a book open before him, waiting for the first patients to arrive. He has saved enough for a new volume, *Forming a Guide to the Stars for Every Night of the Year, With an Introduction*. His work has granted him this freedom, this ability to save and purchase what he needs in order to continue his education. And if this is the only freedom he has, if this is what life must become, then he will collect the library of his future, volume by volume. It will be, he thinks, much like buying time. If he must continue his work in medicine, this work of his father's preference, these few hours each morning when he can be alone with his books to contemplate, then that future must be enough, he tells himself, well aware of the damage that such lies cause.

His father wakes to the sound of a turning page. From the time of William's return from Catherwood's expedition, he has sensed a change in his son, a distance in his gaze and conversation, though never in his work. Dr Wills does not speak of this. Instead, he waits for William to announce his thoughts, to lay them out as patient to physician. *If we are to live the life of the mind*, he has reminded William throughout his life, *we must push our feelings aside*.

Seldom do they speak of that which does not concern this day's work, tomorrow's, talk of yesterday a luxury they do not allow, unless it is to muddle over some failure here in this medical tent or in an office, decades earlier in Devon, all of which Dr Wills has filed away to submit as instruction when the occasion presents itself. *From my mistakes, you shall learn to fulfil a destiny*. Is this what his father is trying to say? William wonders. How will he ever tell the man that it is not medicine he wishes to pursue, especially not here, with the undiscovered country waiting for him to entice it

into being.

For now, as he does each morning, Dr Wills lets William have his hour alone with his books. His son asks for little, and the unspoken agreement seems to be that this time is an indulgence that William will confine inside the borders of the tent. At least he has given up on reading Pope, Dr Wills thinks.

At ten minutes to eight, William shuts his book and places it on a shelf with the other volumes. By eight o'clock, the first patients arrive. William's desire dissolves like last night's dream.

At noon, Dr Wills says that he needs to step outside.

There are some things I need from the general store. Would you like anything while I am out, William?

He shakes his head without looking up. Thank you. No.

Outside the tent, Dr Wills finds himself in the disordered clamour of Ballarat on a cloudless, late summer's day, the dry heat like an assailant. He adjusts his hat to shield his eyes from the glare. This is when he sees her, the young woman staring at the sign above the entrance of the medical tent, her ruddy-brown hair afire in the wind.

He has seen her before, he thinks, but where he cannot recall.

May I help you? he asks.

Yes, she says, at last turning from the sign. I have come to see William. She sees his eyes grow wide and tries again. That is, sir, I would like to have a moment with Mr William Wills.

And he understands at once. These weeks of quiet labour, their close proximity. Even when William was a child, he could recognise traits of himself in his son, his own reserve and formality in even the most trivial of matters. But something new has

occurred since his son returned from that failed foray in the desert. At first, he had mistaken it for adult camaraderie, the time when a father begins to detect his own core in the grown son. Now, he sees the roots of William's recent stoicism as an aftershock of this young woman whose raw beauty a handful of men loiter outside the tent to gaze upon. For a moment, he feels guilt for allowing himself to do the same, his eyes entertaining her small form, the freckles on her nose, a perfected pout that reminds him of a look his own wife gave him once, years before William and Thomas were born, on a night when he did not turn up at the table for dinner and she found him in the library, brooding over a medical case he has long since forgotten, though what happened after he followed her upstairs remains as fresh in his memory as this morning's shave. Staring at this young woman's mouth, her eyes (he can hardly believe it: one is green, the other grey), he cannot help himself from coveting, if only for a moment, that which his own son has coveted and perhaps covets still.

He directs her inside and walks with regret across the street to sit outside the publican house, where he can catch up on the news of the day that has not yet made its way into the tent and still keep an eye on the entrance and try to ascertain the goings-on within.

She finds William in the corner, sitting at his desk, back straight as he writes in his journal. It is precisely where she imagined he would be, all those times she has thought of him here, working with his father. She moves cautiously towards him.

It is true, she says, pushing the words from her mouth.

He places his pen on the desk, clasps his fingers, elbows on the table as though she were his next patient and he were waiting to hear her complaint.

You've come back.

A slight nod. He closes the journal.

They told me you were back, she says, as she continues towards him. I heard from someone on the street, one of your father's patients, that you were here, that something went wrong with the expedition.

There are things she wants to say — there is always more, she would like to tell him — but for now she leaves it at that. There have been nights when she has not slept, others when she has woken in fright or expectation, her body damp with longing.

When were you planning to come for me, William?

If he speaks now, he knows, he will say things that he has not planned. He has acted irresponsibly. He will not allow himself to do so again, not with her, not with anyone. All he can do is look away.

After ... after, she says, but the single word is all she can collect before her mind falters beneath the weight of everything that came before and which should come next.

He lowers his head. She is right, he knows. He does not think of himself as this kind of man. She has offered herself to him, and he has taken her. In the warm night, when her body swayed before him, after she extinguished the four candles on the small table in her dressing room and, in the gaps of their gentle humming, they uttered promises, secrets sealed off from the rest of the world.

The company will be moving on, she says. We have some time off in Melbourne. Several weeks in the city. Then we will go to Birchwool.

Beechworth, he corrects her.

She nods. Don't you have anything to say?

He lowers his head.

Don't you have anything you want to tell me?

Unable to bear his silence, she steps back, eventually lowering her eyes and turning from him so that she can escape before he sees her cry.

From across the street, Dr Wills stands, wondering whether he should call out to her, this beautiful (though somewhat vacant, he must say), distraught young woman. This, he thinks, and the possibility of talking to her again. He could try to understand her agitated state and offer counsel. But she is too far gone. He returns to the tent to have a word with his son.

He finds William where he left him, sitting behind the desk. In his father's eye, William recognises a gaze of reproach for his manner of handling this episode, all of the ways he has disgraced himself by letting drama enter where no drama belongs.

The next weeks pass without interruption. They work together, one man leaning over the next, their calm calls for assistance. Two months later, Dr Wills excuses the last patient, an old man who forgets his newspaper on the table. William picks it up and steps outside.

Excuse me, sir. You left this behind.

Already read it, young man. You keep it.

At his desk, William sits over the newspaper while his father tidies the two areas where he and his son — the future Dr Wills, as he thinks — see patients. With little interest, Wills reads the stories printed in *The Argus*, stories that most of the patients have retold throughout the day and which, by now, seem like news from yesteryear, even though the details have altered in the telling and he now finds himself smiling at the thought of enjoying their falsehoods more than the facts themselves. He turns the

page and sees a notice: *The Newly Established Committee for Exploration Plans an Expedition to Cross the Continent from South to North*. Wills reads it several times, his index finger perched on the most important line, its request for a skilled surveyor.

Chapter 8: Without Return

THEY SET OUT early the next morning. Each man rides alone in search of disturbances in the land. In the evenings, they return to the camp and report their findings.

For two weeks, this pattern continues. There are few discoveries: a single boot brought back by Vinning; a pipe Brahe finds in the middle of a clearing; a broken knife that Howitt extracts from the base of a tree.

Then, at the beginning of the third week, Welch is nearly thrown from his horse.

He struggles for several moments, pulling tight at the reins to lull the animal into submission. Together they turn in a small circle, Welch soothing the horse with gentle promises until its sighs abate.

North by north-west, they continue their passage. After several hundred yards, the horse rears upward once again, Welch's struggle more intricate this time. Several moments pass before he looks up. A band of natives, thirty, perhaps forty men, have stepped out of the trees — stepped out of nowhere, he thinks — to surround him.

He raises an empty palm, holds it outward. He turns the horse so that each of the natives can see his signal. *I have come in peace*, he wants to show them. *I will not harm you*. All the while, his other hand remains perched above his pistol.

The natives continue their approach. The horse rears once again. Whitefellas, Welch says, after he regains control. He repeats the word, this time more slowly. He moves his hand to his face, rubs the skin between beard and brow, points to his chest. Several men nod in unison and point vigorously into the distance. They then turn to Welch and open their arms wide as though casting a net over water. Behind them, two

others step from the ring of trees. One man prods the other onward. Within ten feet of Welch, the hesitant man springs forth, released at once from the other's grasp.

He falls forward, this small man, body tumbling towards the hooves of Welch's horse. With some difficulty, he stands and removes the oversized hat from his head. He takes three steps, hesitates, falls forward.

Stop where you are, Welch shouts, pistol now in hand.

The man obeys. He looks up, and for the first time Welch sees his face, white beneath the grime and unruly hair, eyes blue and beseeching.

Who in God's name are you? Welch asks.

I am John King.

The voice is weak, difficult to discern. To make sure that he has heard correctly, Welch repeats the name — John King? — though it means nothing to him.

Yes, he says. I am the last of them. I am all that is left.

They lay him on a cot inside the main tent. Vinning lifts the leather satchel over his head as Aitkin carries a palm full of sugar to the man's mouth. Tongue surfacing shyly out of sunburnt lips, King draws the sugar in, several grains at a time. The faint trace of a smile.

The four members of the search party round his body like prey. With moans and grunts, negligible movement of limbs and head, he answers their questions about the tribe that took him in. Through all of this, Brahe remains outside the circle, not yet prepared to lay eyes on this man who has returned as though from another world. The others nudge him onward, this John King, each wanting to go beyond the boundaries that Howitt has set. Some words he repeats — *gifts*, *nardoo*, *Karuwa* — while they sit beside him in the tent, listening as he fades in and out his story, a story which, through his telling, becomes their own.

She steps through the garden, clutching the letter in her hand.

Are you certain that you want to go alone, dear? her mother asks, but Julia does not answer.

She walks into the city, thirty minutes on a windy day, the threat of rain so imminent that she can taste it. She wants to feel rain against her face, her neck. She wants to collect its drops and pass them on to William and Robert, tiny drops that she will carry in the chalice of her collarbone. Water and with it her taste, this offering in their time of need.

To her previous letters, those single-page notes to the Committee in which she detailed her concern for the missing party, she has had no response. Three weeks have passed since she sent the second letter, and for this reason she has decided to go to Macadam, the man Robert said she could trust. She will deliver this letter and wait. She will show him how concerned she has become over the news that is always the same news, the group of men lost in the desert, and how something must be done before it is too late.

Feathers lie scattered across the cage's floor. The birds look diseased, Howitt thinks, their tail feathers worn by incessant brushing against the thin bars. He cups the first bird in his hands, places it on the desk before him.

He has already written the letter informing the Committee of this development that is at once an end and a beginning, four notes on tiny paper that he will fasten to each bird before sending them on their way. It is an end to the story he has been composing all along, a beginning to something else which, since he first saw Welch riding across the plain with another man — the horse that departed with one figure but which returned with two — he fears he will never escape.

The pigeon flaps its wings, floats gracefully through the still air before collapsing on the table where it pecks over Howitt's maps and journals. The next three birds do little more than hobble across the floor.

He calls for Welch. I need you to kill four birds for me.

What did you have in mind?

Howitt points to the pigeons. That's what I have in mind.

Half an hour later, Welch finds Howitt at his desk, sitting over a jar of cobbler's wax. Welch draws the dead birds from the bag and lays them on the table. Howitt pushes the jar aside and removes the dead birds' tail feathers, which he sets beside the jar. Once satisfied, he dips a thin brush into the wax.

I'll need your hands, he says to Welch. Open the cage. We'll work on one bird at a time.

Welch holds the first pigeon in place while Howitt brushes the wax onto the dead bird's tail feathers and then presses it onto the quivering pigeon. For several seconds, he applies pressure to wax and feather, healing the bird with the heat of his thumb.

Together, he and Welch mend all four pigeons. Once finished, they perform a test flight inside the tent. Hesitant at first, like a group of children in ill-fitting clothes, the pigeons are at last coaxed into flight. Feathers fall like snow upon Howitt's shoulders. He returns to the desk, opens the jar of wax. They begin again.

She knocks on the door and is greeted by a man who informs her that Mr Macadam will have no time to see her today.

Then I will come back tomorrow, she says.

I'm afraid that Mr Macadam will be in a meeting all day tomorrow, the man says.

Then I will come back the next day and the day after that.

He tells her that he will deliver her letter to Macadam, that she need not worry. You have my word, he says, Julia already descending the steps to hide her face. They move outside, pigeon cage in hand. The others gather to watch. King crawls out of the tent behind them, shielding himself from the sun. He and Brahe eye one another, their inclination to touch the other's wounds before belief.

Howitt checks to make sure that his notes to the Committee are secured to each pigeon. The men stand bent at the waist, eyes focused on the darkening sky. Though they have not read Howitt's message, each knows that news of their lives, here in the middle of the continent, will take flight homeward, that soon it will reach others, their story, these deaths, exposed at last. From this moment, there can be no turning back, the beginning that is also an end, which Howitt's birds will set in motion.

Pleased at his surgery, Howitt turns to Welch and thanks the surveyor for his help. The two men shake hands. Then the sound: unmistakable shrieks from above. Hands still clasped, they look up at once. Hawks circle overhead, three in all, each with a pigeon snared in its talons.

Howitt scans the sky for the fourth pigeon. Nothing. The sky is blank, perfectly blue. Perhaps there is still hope, he thinks. Perhaps one has managed to get away. Then, amidst his men's grumbling, he hears it, the sound he cannot escape. A single bird steps awkwardly about, cooing inside its cage. A single bird that has refused to take flight, the gaps in its tail like missing strings in a violin.

SHE ASKS HER mother to close the door behind her when she leaves.

I need to be alone, she says, and Mrs Matthews knows not to argue.

She looks into the mirror, curious to see how her features have reacted to this news, an unplanned scene for which she has no response. An hour ago, when she heard the knock downstairs, she was preparing to leave for the city. From her room, she could hear her mother's footsteps, then her voice, the voice of someone addressing a stranger: *Can I help you?*

There is no show tonight, this was to be a day of rest, and Julia decided not to let the interruption disturb her preparations. How wonderful, she had thought, only moments before she heard the knock, to awaken on a spring morning, with no obligations, the city spread out like a carpet, waiting. A light wind fluttering through the trees outside her window. All the world enlivened beneath a cloudless sky.

Even before she got out of bed, she decided that they should walk to the harbour, just the two of them. Yes. That was how they should spend their morning. Perhaps she and her mother would visit some of the shops and then have lunch beside the water. How this changes everything.

She stares at her reflection and grows worried by the creases that have begun to line her brow, the bridge of her nose where one of them (Was it Robert or William? What will happen when she begins to forget?) once rested the tip of his own nose. She relaxes the muscles in her face, attempts a smile, one much like her current character gives her fiancé when she asks for a favour, but it is no use. Would he, would they, have recognised this face? Was it this face that he, they, had in mind when ...

She cannot go on, cannot continue this line of thought. In the course of these months, she has aged, their absence quickening the hours. Or perhaps she should blame it on the sun that her mother warned against the moment they set foot on this

continent, a lifetime before. That time before their names pulsed through the pattern of her days and nights.

From the drawer of her dressing table, she gathers her gloves. The gloves of kid leather that she bought to replace the other ones that she presented to each of them, the left hand for William John Wills, the right one for Robert O'Hara Burke, which she unveiled only hours before he returned to his men, asleep in some paddock north of Melbourne. That same night, he went down on his knee for the second time and, unlike before, she had not laughed.

She stands before the mirror, gloved hands clasped in front of her waist to steady their trembling. I need to be alone, she says, this time to herself.

In the street, the breeze is warm against her dress. For several blocks, she walks north, then turns east. The rush of anonymous lives. On the corner is a shop where the day before she had gone to enquire about a new dress. She had needed one. For what? She can no longer remember. Through the window, she sees the shopkeeper, a pleasant woman, always polite and inquisitive about Julia's career. How many times has she been inside, the two of them talking, laughing? She knows they have shared things, intimate secrets about their lives, secrets that Julia has kept from others, her mother included. Still, she cannot remember the woman's name.

She steps away from the window. Unable to bear the thought of engaging in conversation at this moment, however helpful another's ears might prove, she proceeds, eyes lowered, to the next corner. In the distance emerges the green dome of the Botanic Gardens. She has not planned to go there, she left home with no plans at all, yet she cannot stop herself from continuing, as though this openness (odd, she thinks, how one can always find privacy in the most public of places) has lured her all

along.

Rounding the corner, she feels the fine cloth of the man's suit pressed suddenly against her cheek, his pungent smell, long before she sees his face. The brush of another body, years before. The collision of lives. She looks up, hopeful, if only for a moment.

Pardon me, the man says, as he removes his hat. He lowers his head, attempts to look into her eyes, but she refuses to meet his gaze. Are you all right, miss? Concerned that he has shocked or harmed her, he lowers himself until his forehead reaches her chin.

She can sense his grey dress, she can sense that he wears spectacles and has a moustache. Otherwise, she registers no further details of his appearance. Without answering, she pulls away. Her eyes are glazed, slightly drunken, her body open to the street.

A radiant spring day. She would like to come here with him, she thinks. The one who did not push her away. The one who came to her after the other, in a medical tent in Ballarat, refused to claim her offerings. Yes. To come here with Robert O'Hara Burke. Strange how he exists for her always in his full name. Perhaps it is because she likes the sound of it, all of those rolled *Rs*, the vowels that her affected Irish accent fondles before she releases them. She repeats the name, *Robert O'Hara Burke*. The man watches as her lips move. Later, after she returns home, she will write to him. She will tell him about this man on the street who bumped purposefully into her. *There are some who would like to steal me away from you.* She will tell him that he must hasten his return. That he must come back to her so they can walk here together, strolling arm in arm to these gardens that stretch into the sun-filled harbour. That this may be the most beautiful place on earth, but not when one is alone.

Behind her, the man does not move. He watches as she crosses the street without looking. For several minutes, he stands on the corner, eyes fixed on Julia's light-blue dress, the downward curve of her long, graceful neck, shoulders sad in the morning light.

She climbs the green slope. Beyond the movement of traffic he stands still among the hum of this Tuesday morning, watching as her slim figure sinks, step by sleepy step, until she is out of sight.

How simple her life has been until this moment. If this were a rehearsal, she would approach the director and demand revision. It would be as easy as that. She has always known how to convince others (directors, writers, her mother and father) of alternate possibilities, that her thoughts demand respect. Even as a child, in those impromptu performances before aunts and uncles, she was able to evaluate a room.

In the soft shade, she imagines the voice of the stranger from earlier this morning. He stood at the door, addressing her mother: *They have found Mr Burke's body*. From her room, all she could hear was her mother shutting the front door, followed by the click of the lock. Julia continued her preparations, certain that her mother would climb the stairs and tell her whether this message involved her. Soft footsteps across the foyer. The slow ascent of stairs, pneumatic creaking of the third and fifth steps that wakes her each morning when her mother begins the day.

After several moments, Julia opened the door to see what was taking so long. There, in the stairwell, she could see her mother's silhouette but not her face. Mrs Matthews stood slumped, the side of her forehead pressed to the wall for support.

Tell me, Mother.

She turned. Julia? Her voice rising. Julia? Never before had she heard her mother

Speak with such uncertainty.

From that moment, there could be no more denials.

In the past months, she has imagined this possibility, of course. She had always known that it could end this way. He — they — could stumble north across the blistered continent without return. More than once, she wondered how she would react when this verdict was announced. If it were a role, if one of her characters found herself in a similar situation, would she scream upon such a realisation, when her beloved, *beloveds*, lost, were at last found, bodies recovered in place of essence?

In her room (earlier, for she now sits outside, her back warmed by the morning sun), there were no screams. To Mrs Matthews's surprise, there were no sounds at all. When Julia heard the words — *He has died, love. They have found him. Both of them* — she turned away. She stepped back into her room as though her mother had merely informed her that she was not yet ready to leave for the city, that she would need more time to prepare.

Now, she wonders how she will return from this place, this moment, to that other version, the one she has been composing, scene by scene, since that night he gave her the miniature portrait of himself and she, not having planned to give him anything, told him to wait. *Don't move*, she had said, her index finger drawing a circle around his wrist. She went to her room and shuffled through her bedside table. After scrutinising several items, she settled on the glove of kid leather, the one whose companion had served as another gift.

Burke stood when she returned to the room.

She placed her palm against his chest and pushed him back. *Sit*, she said.

Pale as your English cheek. Had he said that, once she unveiled the glove, or was

this what she would have had him say if the scene were in a play, the two of them actors in a life whose outcome could be different? How will she ever be able to trust her memories again?

She stares at the miniature portrait. For the past months, she has kept it nearby. Some nights, she has placed it on her bedside table, just as he asked of her. From there, perched on a stack of letters, he would watch over her. And she knew that, wherever he was, the same sky and stars covered his night, that he was safe. If the story were in her hands, if she were allowed, on occasion, to alter dialogue (*This does not sound true*, she was fond of saying, her suggestion being, directors always knew, that it did not sound like *her*) then she would alter this story. What now?

She lays the portrait on her lap. It is, she thinks, the face of a poet, his stare intense yet detached, tranquil yet mad. How many times in the past months has she thought about tucking that wisp of loose hair behind his right ear? She would need to dampen her fingers. She would need to stand on her toes and press the tips of her fingers into his pale and slightly freckled skin. Then she could smooth that loose strand of hair behind his ear.

In the photograph, clutched between ribcage and elbow, his right hand, gloved in white, blushes brilliantly. Through his thick beard, she notices for the first time that his mouth is slightly open. How had she not noticed this before? It is as though he has been surprised by the photographer's instructions, or perhaps this act has crept beyond the edge of his patience. Caught, in the middle of contemplation, by the camera's flash. It is a thought that Julia would like to know but can now only imagine, a word or sentence that will haunt her, this image of Robert O'Hara Burke, the man who would have been her lover, her husband, all the things she wants to tell him now, years from now, the things she would like to hear and know and never will.

She listens to the conversation of two approaching women. Their talk shifts from dinner to the shops. Julia turns her head so that they will not see her. She does not want them to see that she has been crying, this poor child weeping over an open portrait. The women pass and she looks to see if anyone else follows. If she stays here and continues to stare at him and his unkempt hair, his slightly open mouth, her cries will grow audible.

She will move on, she must. She will stroll through the gardens because that is what people do. She will allow this day to sweep her up in its rhythms because that is what people do. That, she thinks, is how one continues, all of the hours spilling one into the next.

Epilogue

SHE WAKES TO the sound of her husband's voice. The hours have passed, decades. Australia. England. America. In St Louis, upstairs in a large house on the Mississippi River, she is a married woman. There are secrets that she keeps from her husband, those which, she often thinks, she would have happily told either William John Wills or Robert O'Hara Burke.

She wakes to the sound of her husband's reassuring voice. She wakes beside him in the warm bed.

The attacks. He knows what to do when they take hold. He reaches out to her, his hands softened by the passage of time. They are not what they once were, coarse, like the hands that touch her in her dreams, hands for which, even after all of these years, her body aches.

There, he says, pushing a strand of loose hair from her eyes. There.

His hand glides along her arms, across her chest and to her throat and chin, the side of her mouth, now lined, more beautiful than ever, he thinks.

What was it? she asks. What happened?

You were dreaming.

Was I talking again?

No, he says, continuing the lie that he has sustained throughout their marriage. Her voice in the night. The two names she releases in whatever dark room they inhabit, in whatever country. It is the voice of someone he has never known. The names. Sometimes it is Robert, other times, William. He has never asked about them, he does not think that he could bear to learn about these men whom she cries for in her sleep,

men she once loved and loves still, these secrets she carries through her days.

You were having another nightmare, Julia.

What time is it?

It's early, he says. I will go downstairs and make a cup of tea.

She knows that this is not the first time her fits have startled him. Her screams in the night. He sometimes fears the neighbours will confront him. The things she has woken in darkness to break. In the past few years, the attacks have lessened. Until recently. Julia tugging at her greying hair. Screaming about a tree in the middle of some Australian desert.

She attempts to sink back into sleep, her body exhausted by the trauma of memory. But in her sleep, she knows that the same dreams will beckon her. The same visions that infect her days. They will be strolling along the river, arms joined, laughing at the dog's latest adventure, and she will stop, saying that she must catch her breath. And how, over time, he has learned that everything is connected.

In another room, on another continent, thirty years before, John King lies on the floor of a tent at the bend of a creek along which rises a tree with an inscription whose command he wakes to each morning, until one morning, decades later, he does not wake at all. He is an old man who keeps a young man's story locked inside of him.

Beside the creek, there are sounds King makes that Alfred Howitt recalls until the hour of his own death, sixteen years after he listened, first, to William Brahe and, then, to John King speak of the men whose bodies he would one day cover with the Union Jack. For sixteen years, Howitt lives among ghosts.

His wife opens a jar of sugar, carving grains from the surface to fill a small spoon, which she lowers into the cup. Three taps of the spoon against the cup's rim. He

watches as she raises the cup to her lips, a drop of tea at the side of her mouth. He wants to gather it in his palm and carry it into the desert, this man who knows the sacredness of water. There cannot be a finer moment in life, he will think, more than once in the years after his return from the desert, the two of them sitting at the table, comfortable in their silence, the years like chapters in a favourite book which they can revisit, their shared memory an occasional shiver in the bones, and at once he will hear the sound of an approaching train, touch a piece of leather that reminds him of a satchel that he was asked to carry into the heart of the continent, its contents sealed away for the future, never opened, never destroyed, kept safe for a time when he will be able to face this story without apprehension, his body returned to the place where King lay that first night after they recovered him, still shocked to find himself among white men who spoke and moved and breathed and did not yet know enough to condemn him.

John King writes a letter every year on the anniversary of that day, which he celebrates as his birthday, *the day you gave my life a new beginning, Mr Howitt, and saved me, Mr Howitt, for this I thank you and pray for yourself and your family.* Before he dies, Howitt will receive sixteen of these letters. From then on, King will write to his saviour's wife. The ritual of their arrival, envelopes postmarked from St Kilda. She will think about this man whose burden became the burden of her husband, haunting him through those years before he died, all that he told her about his time in the desert searching for a group of lost men. All that she gathered from his silence. All that she will never know about the story that obsessed him throughout his days.

The attacks.

Don't worry, Julia tells her husband. Please. Come back to bed.

And they will go away, he knows, though what part of her life remains hidden after all these years he can never be certain. These secrets that rise, on occasion, to startle us. All that we leave behind for others to pick up and carry.

The Landscape of Desire: Self and Other in James Salter's A Sport and a Pastime

Introduction

Intentions

The following exegesis will examine the work of the French theorist René Girard. It will focus specifically on Girard's theory of *triangular desire*. The exegesis will define Girard's theory and investigate whether that theory applies to a contemporary novel, James Salter's *A Sport and a Pastime* (1967).

Deceit, Desire and the Novel

In his groundbreaking study of the early modern novel, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961; English trans. 1965), Girard ascertains that there are shared similarities in the relationships that develop among characters in certain classic works of literature. Girard believes that these similarities unfold within a model. For this *model*, Girard uses a triangle. He defines what occurs within that triangle—those shared similarities in the relationships among characters and their competing desires—as *triangular desire*. *Triangular Desire* allows us to view a specific type of conflict that resides in many works of fiction. Understanding this type of conflict can be important for the beginning novelist, for it allows her to observe the essentials of character development; a beginning writer would do injustice to her craft, however, if she were to place theory above the craft of fiction itself.

Triangular Desire

Girard uses the three points of a triangle to demonstrate the relationship among the main characters in certain types of novels. He defines these three characters as *subject*, *mediator* and *object*.

In *triangular desire*, the *object* (often a woman) is someone who contains qualities that attract the interest of two others. These two others (often men) are the *mediator* and *subject*. The *mediator*, in his obvious desire for the *object*, paves the way for the *subject* to notice the *object's* desirability. This forces him to, in turn, also desire the *object*. The *mediator* then becomes an obstacle/rival for the *subject*. While the *mediator* is not necessarily an antagonist, the *subject* is not necessarily the novel's hero.

In their quest to possess the *object*, the *mediator* and *subject* become rivals. This rivalry escalates as the *subject* seeks to become increasingly like the *mediator*, whom he admires for his closeness to the *object*. The *subject's* desire, Girard's theory informs us, is to *imitate* the *mediator* as both vie for a single goal: the *object*.

This exegesis will investigate whether we can observe Girard's theory of *triangular desire* in a case study, Salter's novel. It will also examine the candidate's own creative project, a novel titled *The Landscape of Desire*, and ask whether we can observe Girard's theory in that novel.

Questions

This exegesis (19,190 words) is submitted as part of the candidate's PhD in creative writing. The other component of this degree consists of the candidate's creative project, a novel titled *The Landscape of Desire* (67,880 words). Together, the candidate's creative project and this exegesis will investigate Girard's theory and how we can observe that theory in the contemporary practice of the art of the novel. In doing so, it will consider the following questions:

* Chapter 1: a) How does Girard define *triangular desire*? b) How does he define the three figures who construct the three points of his triangular model: *subject*, *mediator* and *object*?

* Chapter 2: a) Using Girard's theory, who is the *subject* of *A Sport and a Pastime*? b) What role does this *subject* play?

* Chapter 3: Using Girard's theory, who is the *mediator* of *A Sport and a Pastime*?³ This chapter will primarily investigate whether the relationship between the two main male characters in *A Sport and a Pastime* fits Girard's definition of the relationship between *subject* and *mediator*.

* Chapter 4: How useful is Girard's theory to the creation of my creative project, a novel titled *The Landscape of Desire*?

Rationale

This research project will be significant on several levels. Girard's theory of *triangular desire* is indispensable to our comprehension of character development in the novel as an art form. His theory traces the novel's lineage. In doing so, it provides the groundwork for the novel's development, giving us not only knowledge of the history of the novel as an art form but also presenting implications for the future trajectory of the novel.

James Salter

For nearly six decades, James Salter has been regarded as one of America's greatest writers' writers—a novelist admired by critics, peers and prize juries but whose work is not widely read by the general public. For his collection *Dusk*, Salter received a PEN/Faulkner Prize, one of America's premier literary awards. In March 2007, four of Salter's works were reissued to coincide with the paperback release of his most recent story collection, *Last Night*. Two of these reissued works—*The Hunters* and *Light Years*—are now published by Penguin Modern Classics. Salter's third novel,

³ Girard focuses primarily on the relationship between the *subject* and *mediator*. This exegesis will also focus specifically on that relationship.

and the book many critics regard as his masterpiece, *A Sport and a Pastime*, has been published by the esteemed Modern Library.⁴

Among Salter's admirers are Susan Sontag, who has written that "[Salter] is among the very few North American writers all of whose work I want to read, whose as yet unpublished books I wait for impatiently" and Richard Ford, who has said that "Sentence for sentence, Salter is the master"⁵

Over the years, however, Salter has received criticism for what some see as excessively poetic and mannered prose. A *New York Times Book Review* of *Light Years* called Salter's writing "strained," and "rather silly," a novel filled with "foolishness" (Towers, *New York Times Book Review*, July 27, 1975).

Yet Salter, whose works Harold Bloom has included in *The Western Canon*, has a reputation that continues to grow (as the inclusion of his work in Penguin Modern Classics editions demonstrates) during his lifetime. The major survey thus far of Salter's work, William Dowie's *James Salter* (Twayne's United States Authors Series, 1998), includes two passing references (both in a single chapter on *A Sport and a Pastime*) to Girard's theory of *triangular desire*. In that chapter, Dowie notes the importance of *triangular desire* in the whole of Salter's fiction. There is, however, no book- or exegesis-length published study of *triangular desire* in Salter's fiction. Yet even Dowie admits that "there are a number of triadic relationships in Salter's corpus...in all of these instances, the situation involves two men and the woman they both desire" (Dowie 1998, p. 54). This exegesis will, therefore, prove beneficial in helping readers to understand one of the essential aspects of Salter's work. In doing

⁴ Founded in 1917, the Modern Library (now a division of Random House, U.S.A.) has sought, throughout its history, to publish "The Modern Library of the World's Best Books."

⁵ Both quotes come from blurbs on Salter's memoir, *Burning the Days* (1997, Harvill, London).

so, it will also investigate whether Salter's novel and Girard's theory inform the candidate's creative project.

René Girard

Aside from the above-mentioned accolades bestowed upon Salter, there remains a wide interest in Girard's work. Since 1991, at least thirty-nine books that deal with Girard's theory of *triangular desire* have appeared or have gone to press (Arias 1996, *Journal of Comparative Literature*, Vol. 48, No. 1, pp. 82-84). These numbers demonstrate the fact of Girard's ongoing importance in literary studies.

This exegesis is not the work of a literary theorist or critic but, rather, the work of a beginning novelist. It will, therefore, explore Girard's theory in terms of its aspects that are beneficial to the creative writer. What might one creative writer learn from Girard? What can we learn from the work of those masters Girard examines? Can we use his theory to analyse the techniques of James Salter? Finally, how useful is Girard's theory and the case study of *A Sport and a Pastime* to my creative project, *The Landscape of Desire*?

Chapter One: How does Girard define *Triangular Desire*? How does he define its three figures: *subject*, *mediator* and *object*?

René Girard

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, René Girard⁶ investigated what classic novels have in common. Among his case studies in that work, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, are *Don Quixote*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Notes from the Underground*, *The Possessed*, *The Red and the Black*, *The Charterhouse of Parma*, *Madame Bovary*, *Sentimental Education*, and *Remembrance of Things Past*.

Girard examined these novels and others to ascertain how situations among characters echo, or *imitate* one another throughout the novel as an art form. His conclusions show that certain literary works evolve through a complex system of relationships among their characters. *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* focuses primarily on these relationships: How do they begin? What draws the characters together? And most important: How do the characters move among one another in alternating structures of power and desire?

Girard's theory shows us that great works of literature resemble one another in the manner through which they establish the nature of their characters' longing, or *desire*. The ultimate achievement of the novel as an art form, Girard believes, has been in the ways in which novelists reveal their characters' desire.

This chapter will define Girard's theory. It will, primarily, investigate the central model of that theory, which Girard terms *triangular desire*.

⁶ Girard was born in France in 1923. He is a theorist with a background in psychoanalysis and structural anthropology. His most famous works include *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, *Violence and the Sacred* and *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*.

The Novelistic Novel

Girard breaks novels into two categories. He defines these categories as *romantic* and *novelistic*. He uses the term *romantic* to describe “those works which reflect the presence of a mediator without ever revealing it and the term *novelistic* for the works which reveal this presence. It is to the latter,” he writes, “that [*Deceit, Desire and the Novel*] is primarily devoted” (Girard 1965, p. 17). It is, therefore, to that latter that this exegesis will be devoted.

The *mediator*, as discussed in the introduction, is the model whom the disciple, or *subject*, wishes to imitate. The final point on the Girardian triangle, the *object*, inspires passion in both the *subject* and *mediator*. This inspired passion causes a rivalry between the *subject* and *mediator*, who compete for possession of the *object*.

A work is *novelistic* by Girard’s definition when the writer reveals the presence of the *mediator* in this rivalry; this *mediator*, in the *novelistic novel*, becomes a physical presence in the book itself.

The *mediator* represents one of two spheres of possibilities (Girard 1965, p. 9) in the novel. These *two spheres* consist of the possible directions that the novel might take. The *subject* represents the second *sphere of possibilities* that the novel can take. The direction the novel takes depends on whether the *subject* or *mediator* proves victorious in their rivalry for the *object*.

Psychological Laws

In *Deceit, Desire & the Novel*, Girard discovered similarities in character development in novels of Dostoyevsky, Cervantes, Proust, Flaubert and Stendhal, as well as in the work of other writers who are established firmly in the literary canon.⁷ These similarities evolve around what Girard terms *psychological laws*. Girard examines how these *psychological laws*—or similarities among characters’ desires and the relationships among characters in seemingly disparate works of fiction—develop in those novels which reveal the presence of a *mediator*.⁸ His theory reveals that understanding the work of a writer such as Stendhal helps us to comprehend the work of Dostoyevsky or Proust or Cervantes. For, as Girard writes, “There is no gulf between the great novelists” (Girard 1965, p. 69).

The above revelation from Girard’s theory establishes a lineage in the art of the novel. Girard’s theory remains important for the following reason: comprehension of the lineage he uncovers proves beneficial for readers of literary fiction and for the creative writer. Understanding this theory, then—seeing that *no gulf exists*—allows the novelist to comprehend the ways that previous masters—Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Flaubert, to name three from Girard’s study—develop their characters. The beginning novelist’s comprehension of this character-development will help her gain the knowledge that will allow her to work in the longstanding tradition of the novel and, in some way, extend the dialogue of the art of the novel.

Girard shows us the similarities and connections that run through these great novelists’ works. That theory establishes how these similarities and connections help readers to see that the writer of *novelistic novels* begins in the middle of the ongoing

⁷ Girard also examines works by, among others, Kafka, Andre Malraux, Rabelais, Gide, Hemingway and Zola.

⁸ Girard defines those works which reveal the presence of a *mediator* as *novelistic novels*.

tradition of novelistic art. In his novel *Immortality*, the Franco-Czech writer Milan Kundera describes this tradition as a “relay called history.” Without this “relay,” Kundera writes, “there would be no European art and what characterizes it: a longing for originality, a longing for change” (Kundera 1991, p. 136). Those *longings* constitute the ongoing dialogue that is the art of the novel.

Triangular Desire

Early in his study, Girard establishes the parameters for the relationship among the central characters in the *novelistic novel*. Girard’s theory invites us to consider the novel’s three central characters as the three points on a triangle. What occurs among the three main characters in a *novelistic novel*, he tells us, can always be viewed in terms of these three points. “The triangle,” Girard writes, “is...intersubjective. [The three points] cannot be localized anywhere; the triangle has no reality whatever; it is a systematic metaphor, systematically pursued” (Girard 1965, p. 2).

Girard terms what occurs among the three characters in this model of the triangle as *triangular desire*. These lines leading to the three points of the triangle change in length/intensity as the narrative develops and the characters’ desires wax and wane. Girard sees these changes as a means for understanding the “diversity as well as the unity of [character development and relationships in classic novels]” (Girard 1965, p. 2). By establishing a model to *simultaneously illustrate* the “diversity as well as the unity” of the *novelistic novel*, Girard forms a model for us to explore the lineage of the novel (Girard 1965, p. 2).

What unfolds within the triangle—those ever-evolving relationships among characters—will differ from novel to novel, of course. But Girard’s theory includes a means for us to measure the intensity (relationships, or distance among characters)

within the parameters of his triangular model. Girard's theory maintains that this is because "Desire [or what a character *wants*] is always spontaneous. It can always be portrayed by a simple straight line which joins subject and object" (Girard 1965, p. 3).

Triangular Desire: A Scene

To understand a simple version of how Girard's theory of *triangular desire* functions—and to establish further his definitions that Girard uses to describe the characters within this structure—let us consider the following scene. Picture three characters sitting around a table. Draw a line from one character to each of the others until a triangle forms.

"The spatial metaphor which expresses this triple relationship," Girard writes, "is obviously the triangle... These models," he continues, "always allude to the mystery, transparent yet opaque, of human relations" (Girard 1965, 3). The significance of Girard's theory lies in its ability to help us see the mystery of these *transparent yet opaque* relations. Girard's theory is essential for the novelist because there may be no greater or more important mystery for the art of the novel to uncover. For while the historian examines episodes, the novelist examines characters. And Girard's theory provides the novelist with the essential knowledge of how to uncover the "mystery...of human relations" (Girard 1965, p. 3).

The mere existence of three characters is not enough, however, to create the inevitability of *triangular desire*. In order for Girard's theory to apply to what develops among the three characters seated at the table, several other elements are necessary. These elements will always vary from book to book. They will, most likely, even vary through the course of a single novel, in which the narrative intensity shifts like a musical score and the characters move accordingly. But the *psychological*

*laws*⁹ that Girard establishes in his theory reveal that there are similarities in character development within the triangle.

Let us return, then, to our triangle at the table. Girard's triangle demands that the first character, A. (the *object*) possess something—beauty, wealth, a house in Greece—that will cause the second character, B. (the *mediator*), to acknowledge her. Through his acknowledgment, B. desires to move closer to A. In doing so, B. wishes to possess A.'s beauty, wealth or house in Greece.

B. makes his desire known by redirecting the conversation at the table so that it focuses on A. This shift causes the third character at the table, C. (the *subject*) to observe A. suddenly as though she were in a different light. This change in light sparks a change in the narrative's intensity. In doing so, it creates a new longing in C., whose desire—much like B.'s—is now to move closer to the *object*, A.

The *subject*, C., therefore, unexpectedly finds himself on a new course of desire. As a result of seeing the object through the filter of a *mediator*, he wants to possess that *object* (A.). B. has become, suddenly, the *Other* whom C. wishes to *imitate*. This is because B., whom Girard defines as the “other consciousness” in this scenario, has already recognised A.'s beauty or wealth or house in Greece. Therefore, B.'s (the *mediator's*) recognition of the *object's* worth gives the *subject* a sense of direction. This new direction causes the *subject* to surrender his own free will and, in doing so, allow another (the *mediator*) to choose for him.

Through this surrendering of free will, or what Girard terms the individual's “fundamental prerogative” (Girard, p. 1), the *subject* becomes a psychological double of the *mediator*. These *doubles* compete for the *object's* attention. This competition

⁹ Girard defines these *psychological laws* as the similar traits that stretch through the lineage of the art of the novel.

leads to a competition for control over the narrative itself, for only one—either *subject* or *mediator*—can gain control over the *object* and, therefore, the entire narrative.

Girard's theory focuses on what occurs between the *mediator* and the *subject*. As he writes, "It is not an object which assures [the formation of *triangular desire*]" but rather "it is another consciousness. A third person indicates to the subject [C.] what [he] will begin desiring passionately" (Girard, p. 30). For this to occur, the *subject* needs to be directionless. Girard's theory establishes how characters in *novelistic novels* long to be given a sense of direction. They long to be someone other than themselves. He labels this desire to be someone *Other*, or to imitate someone else, as *imitative desire*.

"Imitative desire," Girard writes, "is always a desire to be Another. The object is to the mediator what the relic is to a saint...The value of a relic depends on its closeness to the saint" (Girard 1965, p. 83). This, to put it simply, is Girard's way of showing that the *subject* looks upon the *mediator* as someone whose presence is sacred. Both *subject* and *mediator* regard the *object* as sacred, as well, a type of grail that must be recovered and cared for. It is the *mediator's* divinity, Girard writes, which "is central to the novelistic genius... [In Proust] the images and metaphors portray the mediator as the relentless guardian of a closed garden where only the elect may enjoy eternal beatitude" (Girard 1965, p. 77).

The *subject* wishes to pass through the gates of this garden in order to *enjoy eternal beatitude*. But to do so, the *subject* will have to compete with the *mediator* for control over the novel's *object*, for both *subject* and *mediator* desire the same *object*.

Rivarly, or The Double Model

Girard defines the results of the *subject's* imitation of the *mediator* as *imitative desire*. *Imitative desire* involves a conflict in which the *subject* and *mediator* become doubles of one another. Girard refers to this doubling as the *double model*. In this *double model*, the *subject* and *mediator* represent the two spheres—or two possibilities—of a single person. Girard's theory establishes that the two possibilities of this *doubling* rest at the centre of the *novelistic novel*. The *subject* and *mediator* establish the multiple directions that the narrative can take. Through their rivalry (in which they compete for the *object*) both *subject* and *mediator* desire to guide the novel in different directions. Each wishes to gain control over—or to possess—the *object*. There is nothing less than a struggle to establish narrative dominance. Once such dominance is established, the model is no longer *double*; it becomes *singular* in the sense that a single victor has risen to gain narrative control.

Let us consider the following example of how this occurs in *The Lord of the Rings*: the *ring*, whose presence weaves throughout Tolkien's books, has the capacity to exert forces of both good and evil on those who possess it. When one character gains possession of the ring, that ring has the capacity to bring good into the world; should another character gain possession of the ring, however, it can unleash forces of evil. To look at this example through the lens of Girard's theory of *triangular desire*, the character who ultimately gains possession of the ring gains power over the other characters in the novel. Having gained possession of the ring—which, in Girard's terms, is a *relic*—this character in Tolkien's books gains control over the narrative itself.

Conclusion

Girard's theory establishes a concrete model—that of a triangle—for us to observe the development of characters in a certain type of literary fiction. He defines this type of literary fiction as the *novelistic novel*, or those works which reveal the presence of a *mediator*. The *mediator* represents a second consciousness in the novel. This *mediator's* disciple, or *subject*, views the *mediator* as both hero and rival. Together, the *subject* and *mediator* compete for a single goal, possession of the *object*. That *object* can be a person or something inanimate. When novels reveal the relationship among these three characters—*subject*, *object* and *mediator*—we can observe in literature a type of character development that Girard labels *triangular desire*. The following chapter will investigate whether Salter's novel, through its relationship among the nameless narrator, Phillip Dean and Anne-Marie, reveals a form of *triangular desire*.

Chapter Two: Using Girard's theory, who is the *subject* of *A Sport and a Pastime*?

What role does the *subject* play in Salter's novel?

The Narrator as *Subject*

September. It seems these luminous days will never end. The city, which was almost empty during August, now is filling up again. It is being replenished. The restaurants are all reopening, the shops. People are coming back from the country, the sea, from trips on roads all jammed with cars. The station is very crowded. There are children, dogs, families with old pieces of luggage bound by straps. I make my way among them. It's like being in a tunnel. Finally I emerge onto the brilliance of the quai, beneath a roof of glass panels which seems to magnify the light.

(Salter 1995, p. 3)

A close examination of the above, opening paragraph of *A Sport and a Pastime* provides the first intimation of the nameless narrator's status in the novel. He wants to pass unseen as he moves through the foreign country (France) he has entered. He wants the privilege of observing through his profession—which, we soon learn, is a photographer—without becoming a presence, or obstacle, to others.

An analysis of the nameless narrator and his work as a photographer will enable us to more clearly investigate his position in Salter's novel. As William Dowie writes in *James Salter, N.*'s "peculiar emotional positioning" among the two other main characters in the novel infuses *A Sport and a Pastime* with its "haunting quality" (Dowie 1998, p. 59). An examination of this "peculiar positioning" will, therefore, take us to the core of what unfolds in Salter's novel. It will allow us to see whether Girard's theory informs the relationships that develop in the novel.

Most importantly in the opening paragraph of *A Sport and a Pastime*, Salter alerts us to the narrator's ultimate desire—a desire already present here and whose intensity increases as the novel progresses: the narrator wishes to become an unseen voyeur. By his very nature, the photographer rarely, if ever, appears in his

photographs. Thus the narrator nearly succeeds, here in the novel's first paragraph, in removing himself from the narrative's frame. Though we continue to hear his voice, his physical presence becomes increasingly removed from the other characters as the novel progresses. The narrator makes it clear, from the beginning, that he wants his role in the unfolding events to be negligible. He wants the others along the *quai*—those who speak the local language (French) and hold what he presumes is a knowledge of the inner workings of all things local—to teach and show him that which has been previously concealed. He is in search of others, Another.

In the beginning, though, his search remains unfocused. The following chapter will investigate whether the reason for this lack of focus connects *A Sport and a Pastime* directly to Girard's theory about the relationship between the *subject* and *mediator*.

A Sport and a Pastime: Brief Synopsis of Plot

A nameless, first-person narrator (known from hereon as N.) travels through France. N. is American, in his mid-thirties. He is a photographer. He believes that "It's in the little towns that one discovers a country, in the kind of knowledge that comes from small days and nights" (Salter 1995, p.15). Because of this belief, N. is grateful to accept an offer from friends to live for a while at their home in the French countryside, in Autun. And so N. leaves Paris for Autun. His plans are to move anonymously through the streets of Autun and immerse himself in France and the life of the French.

After several weeks in Autun, N. returns to Paris for a visit. While there, he meets Phillip Dean, a young American, who has been travelling through Europe. N.

and Dean decide to travel together. On these travels, they meet Anne-Marie, a young Frenchwoman. Dean soon begins an affair with Anne-Marie. N. observes the relationship between Dean and Anne-Marie. He offers details to the reader that he can't possibly know. For he describes, with precision, intimate details of their lovemaking, which occurs in other countryside towns, behind closed doors. Dean has not returned to Autun with tales of his adventures. N. was not in the room as the two made love. Nonetheless, N. imagines what occurs on these travels and behind these closed doors. He works like a voyeur, and even a novelist, in order to see that which he cannot possibly know or see. He turns to invention to provide a story for his reader. He writes in explicit detail what occurs on these trips, in these rooms. As N. says of this time and his actions in working to discover or invent the life between Dean and Anne-Marie, a life he can never know:

I see myself as an *agent provocateur* or as a double agent, first on one side—that of truth—and then on the other, but between these, in the reversals, the sudden deflections, one can easily forget allegiance entirely and feel only the deep, the profound joy of being beyond all codes, of being completely independent, criminal is the word. Like any agent, of course, I cannot divulge my sources. I can merely say that some things I saw myself, some I discovered, for after all, the mutilation, the delay of as little as a single word can reveal the existence of something worthy to be hidden, and I became obsessed with discovery, like the great detectives. I read every scrap of paper. I noted every detail (Salter 1995, p. 50).

In *James Salter*¹⁰, Dowie labels what occurs among the three characters in *A Sport and a Pastime* as a “peculiar positioning” (Dowie 1998, p. 59). This exegesis will explore whether these three characters—despite, or perhaps because of this “peculiar positioning”—form a version of what Girard defines as *triangular desire*. First, let us explore what Dowie means when he writes of the “peculiar positioning” among the characters in Salter’s novel.

¹⁰ Dowie’s book is the only full-length study of Salter’s work at the time of this exegesis.

“Peculiar Positioning” of Desire in *A Sport and a Pastime*

As Dowie writes of *A Sport and a Pastime*, “With its status as an underground classic now confirmed by the Modern Library’s distinguished editorial board, [the novel] seems destined to be a book for the ages. Justifiably. The novel has a haunting quality, largely because of its language and its peculiar emotional positioning of the narrator in relation to the two main characters...” (Dowie 1998, p. 59). This chapter will investigate whether we can observe the “peculiar emotional positioning” that Dowie mentions through the lens of Girard’s theory.

It is within the parameters of the “peculiar” relationship which unfolds among the novel’s three main characters, N. (is he the *subject*?), Phillip Dean (the *mediator*?) and Anne-Marie (the *object*?) that *A Sport and a Pastime* maintains its momentum. Through an analysis of this relationship, we will see whether Salter’s novel becomes a prime example to explore whether Girard’s theory continues to apply to the contemporary novel.

As Girard writes about the narrator of Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, “It is the transcendent quality of a former desire which is relived on contact with a relic of the past. [This relic] has all of the virtues of a sacrament” (Girard 1965, p. 80). Such contact with a *relic* perfectly describes what occurs to the N. at the beginning of *A Sport and a Pastime*. Early in the novel, N. encounters a series of photographs. The photographs were taken years before, when he lived in the French countryside. They remind him—and call him back to—certain events that unfolded during that time.

And so N. remembers that brief flicker in his life when his desire was to imitate Phillip Dean, a younger American, who “reeks of assurance.” As N. says of Dean, “We are all at his mercy... It is the principles of his world to which we respond,

which we seek to find in ourselves. It is his power which I cannot even identify” (Salter 1995, p. 167). Here, as elsewhere, N. informs us of his desire to imitate Dean, much as the *subject* imitates the *mediator* in Girard’s theory of *triangular desire*.

The Narrator Rediscovered His Sacred Relic

As Girard tells us, “Imitative desire is always a desire to be Another. The object is to the mediator what the relic is to a saint...The value of a relic depends on its closeness to the saint. It is the same with the object in [imitative] desire” (Girard 1965, p. 83). In Girard’s theory, the relic moves through the model of *triangular desire*.¹¹ Salter’s narrator comes into contact with the photographs. The photographs are his relic; contact with them sets the novel in motion.

Narrator as Photographer

“Photographing is essentially an act of non-intervention,” Sontag writes in *On Photography*. “[This] comes from the awareness of how plausible it has become, in situations where the photographer has the choice between a photograph and a life, to choose the photograph. The person who intervenes cannot record; the person who is recording cannot intervene” (Sontag 2002, pp. 11-12).

N. has chosen the latter. He will record rather than intervene. This choice means that he will abstain from participating in what he observes in his foreign surroundings. But N. has not had to make the unenviable decision, as Sontag’s theory illustrates, between life and death. He is on holiday in France but also in search of something greater, something that, at this point in the novel, he cannot define.

Girard’s theory tells us that this is because he has not met the *mediator*, who will

¹¹ The relic may not always be in a single character’s possession. When it appears, or reappears, the relic serves as an instant reminder of a previous time.

choose N.'s direction for him. Until this *mediator* arrives, Girard informs us, N. is left to his own indirection. He will continue to invent. He will let his own life fall to the wayside, as he does at the novel's outset, so that he can examine the lives of others. Through this decision, Salter reveals his narrator's desire to become someone *Other* than himself. Girard's theory informs us that this is a desire to imitate, and "Imitative desire is always a desire to be Another" (Girard 1965, p. 83).

The Narrator's *Peculiar Position*

N's presence in the opening scene, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, does not become clear until two-thirds of the paragraph have elapsed. When he finally emerges ("I make my way among them"), he is not the focal point but instead a *witness* to the action. The passers-by, the locals, become the central figures in his description. Rather than placing himself at the centre of narrative action, N. positions these *others* as the main figures in the story. They fill the frame left empty by N.'s need to escape, to disappear behind the lens (veil) of his camera so that he can observe and pass unseen.

Through this positioning, Salter shows that, while being introspective, N. is a character who looks to others for fulfilment. He is in search of a hero. Early on, he establishes that, should he not find a hero on his journey, he is willing to invent one. As he says late in the novel, "One must have heroes, which is to say, one must create them" (Salter 1995, p. 180). As Girard writes in *Deceit, Desire & the Novel*, "The fact of choosing a model"—or *creating* one, with the case of N.—"for oneself is the result of a certain tendency, common to all men, to compare oneself with others" (Girard 1965, p. 14). Such a tendency, as Girard writes, is "always a desire to be Another" (Girard 1965, p. 83).

These two aspects of Girard's theory prove essential to our understanding of N.'s character. Like the *subject* in Girard's theory, Salter's narrator desires to become someone *other* than himself. In the beginning, his search for this *other* is unfocused. To observe this lack of focus through the lens of Girard's theory, we understand that this is because N. has not yet met his *mediator*. For in Girard's theory it is the *mediator*, another consciousness that "indicates to the subject [N.] what [he] will begin desiring passionately" (Girard 1965, p. 30). Once the *subject* receives this indication, Girard's theory establishes that the narrative focuses.

The Narrator as Voyeur

By the time we meet him, N. has already lived for several months in Paris. In this time, he has acquired French clothes, a French haircut. He has taken these steps in order to assimilate, to observe this foreign culture as though he were an insider. He does so because he wishes to be a local, much like those he admires who come back from the country "with old pieces of luggage bound by straps" (Salter 1995, p. 3). The surface features (clothes, haircut) that N. has acquired provide him with the first steps in his desire to pass unnoticed among the locals.

Through his revelation of N.'s obsession to move through the streets as a voyeur, Salter has already laid the foundation for voyeurism that he conducts once he meets Dean and Anne-Marie and the two lovers begin their travels. For now, though, a change of clothes and hairstyle are not enough for N. to achieve his goal. At this stage of the novel, N. stands out among the crowds, in the shops. While he remains invisible until spoken to, his accent continues to betray his foreign (American) origins. When shop assistants hear him attempt to speak French, N. concedes, "They know I am a foreigner. It makes me a little uneasy. I'd like to be able to talk without

the slightest trace of accent—I have the ear for it, I’m told. I’d like, impossible, to understand everything that’s said on the radio, the words of the songs.” And then, in what could be his mantra, he continues: “I would like to pass unseen” (Salter 1995, p. 10).

The fact that N. has acted—that, rather than choosing to intervene, he has chosen to *record*—calls forth Sontag’s notion that “using a camera is still a form of participation...that act of photographing is more than passive observing. Like sexual voyeurism, it is a way of at least tacitly, often explicitly, encouraging whatever is going on to keep on happening” (Sontag 2002, p. 12). N. encourages his imagination to wander—to “keep on happening”—as he invents the details of the relationship between the novel’s Dean and Anne-Marie.

Besides these surface alterations (clothes, haircut), we also see that N. has taken yet another step towards the invisibility required for him to become a voyeur. The camera provides him with another layer against his foreign-ness, for the face and intentions behind the camera’s mask go unseen.

“Since every photograph is contingent (and thereby outside of meaning), Photography cannot signify (aim at a generality) except by assuming a mask,” Roland Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida* (Barthes 1982, p. 34). Such a mask not only changes a *subject*, Girard’s theory informs us, but it also changes the way the *object* perceives itself as it is being photographed. We need only watch the famous scene from Michelangelo Antonioni’s film *Blow-Up* (1966), in which the photographer (the film’s *subject*, played by the actor David Hemmings) straddles the *object* (the model Veruschka). As the camera (*mediator*) approaches, the *object*’s demeanour changes. Veruschka (the *object*) becomes and *Other*, in the presence of this camera/*mediator*, someone who, moments before, she was not. The presence of the camera/*mediator*

creates a new possibility, allowing the *object* to become Another, or someone whom she is not when the *mediator* is not present. While this scene from *Blow-Up* does not follow Girard's definition of *triangular desire*, it does create the possibility of a different kind of triangle, in which the *object* occupies the role that Girard's theory gives to the *subject*. Such an alteration of Girard's theory demonstrates not only the flexibility of *triangular desire* but also provides further implications for that theory and its value in literary studies.

By giving N. the profession of photographer, Salter instils his narrator with manifold possibilities. He assumes the necessary role, as Barthes conceives it and as we see in the above quote, of *Photography*. N. is at once a *capturer* ("To photograph is to appropriate the thing being photographed" (Sontag 2002, p. 4).)—and *creator*. This is part of the contract that Salter establishes early in the novel. It is the contract that acknowledges the novel's narrative complexities and that the pages we read, as N. informs us, are "notes to photographs of Autun." For, in the paragraph that follows, he writes:

None of this is true. I've said Autun, but it could easily have been Auxerre. I'm sure you'll come to realize that. I'm only putting down details which entered me, fragments that were able to part my flesh. It's a story of things that never existed although even the faintest doubt of that, the smallest possibility, plunges everything into darkness. I only want whoever reads this to be as resigned as I am. There's enough passion in the world already. Everything trembles with it. Not that I believe it shouldn't exist, no, no, but this [following narrative] is only a thin, reflecting sliver which somehow keeps reflecting the light (Salter 1995, p. 11).

Position of the Narrator

Yet even earlier, in the novel's opening paragraph, Salter provides the key to N.'s position as the novel's narrator. Dowie believes that the "peculiar emotional

positioning” instills the novel with its “haunting quality” (Dowie 1998, p. 54). Salter’s *peculiar positioning* of the narrator to the other characters assures that, though N. relays the following pages, they will not be *about* him. Much like Ishmael, whose presence in *Moby-Dick* aboard the *Pequod* fades as Melville’s narrative quickens, N. vanishes as the relationship between Dean and Ann-Marie intensifies. Salter’s intentions for his narrator are similar to those of Melville. Neither writer designates their narrator as the narrative’s central player. For N., there is always something else—the crowd in the train station; the streets and architecture of Autun; his relationships with Dean and Ann-Marie—to observe and to raise to the forefront of his narrative.

Girard believes that ideal narrators are those which reside in “the centre of the action and yet scarcely participate in it” (Girard 1965, p. 45). Salter’s narrator, as well as Melville’s in *Moby-Dick*, fits Girard’s description perfectly. By applying Girard’s theory to these narrators, we see that both Ishmael and N. maintain a dual role of *subject/voyeur* within the stories they tell. Both tell it from years later, when they are still trying to come to terms with the events of their past lives.

Viewing their narrative choices through the lens of Girard’s theory establishes that both Melville and Salter’s respective narrators describe “events all the more carefully since he does not always succeed in interpreting them and is afraid of neglecting some important detail” (Girard 1965, p. 45). As voyeurs, both Ishmael and N. remain focused on the details of their story. Because of this, they are more willing to provide their audience (readers) with a story of those around them than with descriptions of themselves.

The Narrator as Thief

Let us now return to Sontag's theory that "using a camera is still a form of participation...that act of photographing is more than passive observing" (Sontag 2002, p. 12). "In Autun, with his camera and observations, N. thinks of Atget and his photographs of Paris, the great photographer "slowly stealing a city from those who inhabited it, a tree here, a store front, an immortal fountain" (Salter 1995, p. 13).

Unlike Atget, N. has no plans to steal Autun from its people. But the reference to "stealing" (Salter 1995, p. 13) shows that N. is not entirely passive. He has come to observe and record. He has come to invent. His narrative, similar to Ishmael's and countless others, begins as a means to at once tell a story and come to terms with the past. Salter's choice of profession fits perfectly with the novel's intentions, for "... photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people take possession of space in which they are insecure" (Sontag 2002, p. 9).

This notion allows us to understand the relationship that is to come, when N. meets, first, Phillip Dean, and then Anne-Marie. After this occurs, N.'s position grows, as Dowie writes, more and more peculiar.

Conclusion

A Sport and a Pastime is a novel of voyeurism and desire. The novel feeds on the experience and vision of a narrator who is endlessly in the process of moving from the central action of the novel and vanishing behind the lives of others. N. does so in order to view the story he narrates and get closer to the two other characters, Dean and Anne-Marie. This removal requires the reader to act: N. entices us to view this story as an outsider, as a voyeur with unexplained (and improbable) access to the main action of the narrative. In doing so, the reader's relationship to N., this narrator/voyeur, becomes central to the relationship that develops in the novel. It is for

this reason that any discussion of Salter's novel must include in-depth analysis of this narrator's position not only to the other figures within the triangle but also his relations to the reader's position, as well.

A novelist's choice of narrator remains one of the most crucial decisions she will make when beginning a new work. This choice signifies to the reader the novel's central consciousness and, through establishing this consciousness, the narrative's point of view. In the case of *A Sport and a Pastime*, the focus of this consciousness, N., is at once the novel's narrator and *subject*. The reader of Salter's novel cannot proceed without a willingness to understand this narrator, as Salter establishes him at the novel's outset. For it is through understanding N. that the reader will be able to witness the changes that occur with the arrival of the novel's *mediator*. It is the relationship between *subject* and *mediator* that becomes most important in Girard's theory of *triangular desire*. This triangle becomes possible through the approach of the novel's *mediator*. Now that we have established the *subject's* role and seen how we can observe that *subject's* role in Salter's novel, we will move on, in the following chapter, to examine the role of the *mediator*.

Chapter Three: The *Mediator*: Using Girard's theory, who is the *mediator* of *A Sport and a Pastime*? This chapter will investigate whether the relationship between the two main male characters in *A Sport and a Pastime* relate to Girard's definition of the relationship between *subject* and *mediator*.

Dress Rehearsal: A (Minor) *Mediator*

Let us return to N.'s train journey, that first sequence within the novel. Once seated in the carriage and on his way, N. observes a young woman—the very person who becomes, for N., the first (though minor) *mediator*—who sits across from him. His description begins with her birthmarks. They are, he writes, “the colour of grape” and “shaped like channel islands” (Salter 1995, p. 3).

Such details (colour, shape) are commonplace in fiction. Good writers give readers details they can fondle and absorb through the senses. What happens several paragraphs later, however, goes beyond the texturing of detail that a novelist provides in order to present the reader with an image—that well-worn adage which claims that good prose *reads* like a photograph. The encounter between N. and the unknown young woman on the train opens another realm of possibilities onto the circumstances within Salter's narrative. For it is there, on the train, seated across from the young woman, that N. establishes his proclivity for invention:

I try to imagine where she works—a *patisserie*, I decide. Yes, I can see her standing behind the glass case of pastry. Yes. That's just it. Her shoes are black, a little dusty. And very pointed. The points are absurd. Cheap rings on both hands. She wears a black pullover, a black skirt. She's a bit heavy. Her brow is furrowed as she reads the love stories in *Echo Mode* (Salter 1995, p. 4).

Here, Salter establishes that N. is prepared to construct fictions in those spaces that are absent of fact. Much like a certain category of historical novelist—and it is in this following category that the candidate offers his creative project, the novel *The*

Landscape of Desire—N. begins with facts and proceeds to invent details as he goes.¹²

N. observes this young woman who sits across from him. He does not let his limited time near her prevent him from *imagining* her life. He will not allow any lack of knowledge of the inner-workings of her life to prevent him from trying to know her. In this way, N. is no different from a novelist who desires to understand her characters.

Subject as Creator

This encounter between N. and the young woman on the train is the first instance in the novel of such *imaginings*. Through this early scene, Salter establishes N.'s proclivity for invention. He desires to pass through life as a voyeur. In doing so, he will construct an imaginative world within his own world. As the previous chapter shows, Salter gives us a narrator who longs for something *other* than what he already possesses. Girard's theory establishes that such longing belongs to the *subject* in *triangular desire*.

Such a proclivity for invention is similar to that of the profession of novelist. It calls to mind the following notion that Nobel Laureate J.M. Coetzee provides in his novel *Foe*: "In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken, I believe. Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story" (Coetzee 1987, p. 141). Like a novelist who works to bring her characters and story to life, N. knows that he must uncover these silent spaces about

¹² As I write in my creative project of the character Robert O'Hara Burke, his desire is to "Begin with the facts this life offers and end in myth. That is what he wants, nothing more, nothing less. But (to begin with) these are not the facts that he had in mind. And so he looks elsewhere..." This establishes that he longs, like Girard's definition of the *subject* for something *other*.

which Coetzee writes. He believes that he must do so in order to understand the people he meets on his journey.

A Sport and a Pastime is, ultimately, a novel of journey and transformation. Dean, N. and Anne-Marie travel enough for the reader to think of Salter's book as a type of road novel. And if N. is to understand himself (and what would be the point of a journey if not to try and step closer to such an understanding?) he must attempt to comprehend the lives of those around him, even if that comprehension comes through invention.

It is within the first pages of the novel, this encounter on the train with the young woman/minor *mediator*, that Salter establishes his contract with the reader: this narrator will invent that which he does not, or cannot, know. Like all contracts we find in novels, Salter shows us how we are to understand N.'s *character*. But how will that character change? Will Girard's theory help the reader to understand N.'s transformation within the novel? Most important, what does Girard's theory about the *mediator's* approach teach us about how that change occurs in a novel such as *A Sport and a Pastime*? Does Salter's novel reveal the presence of a *mediator* and, therefore, fit Girard's definition of *novelistic novel*?

The Unfocused *Subject*

As Salter writes in the novel, the photographer has the ability to use his craft to steal a place— frame by frame, street by street—from its inhabitants. N. tells us that he has come to Autun to discover the real France. To do so, he has left Paris behind. Shortly after his arrival in Autun, N. writes:

Paris seems wondrous to me now, even a little too rich. I'm strangely devout, I find myself defending the meagre life of the provinces as if it were something special. It's not like the life of Paris,

I say, which is exactly like being on an ocean liner. It's in the little towns that one discovers a country, in the kind of knowledge that comes from small days and nights (Salter 1995, p. 15).

Here, Salter establishes that N. has come to Autun to see things more clearly. If we are to view N. as a *subject*, then Girard's theory informs us that his lack of focus in the early stages of the novel stem from the fact that he has not yet encountered his *mediator*. By choosing to leave Paris, however, N. has acted. In doing so, as a *subject* he has taken the necessary step and set himself on a course that will enable his encounter with the novel's *mediator*. For now—early in the novel, with no *mediator* in sight—he will try, single-handedly, to bring his life into focus. On his train journey from Paris, he writes, “It seems I am seeing everything more clearly.” And then, soon after: “The whole idea of coming [to Autun] seems visionary” (Salter 1995, p. 8).

Salter's word choice in the above quote—*visionary*—provides yet another key: N.'s journey will not only be an attempt to discover himself and “the secret life of France”; it will also be a journey (much like the novelist's journey of writing the book) of invention, creation. This notion ties directly to Girard's theory. For, like those characters in the works that Girard examines in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, N. is in search of someone he can *imitate*. If he does not find a hero, he will create one for himself.¹³ He will, therefore, create a guide whom he can admire and whose actions he can *imitate*. Girard defines this *guide* as the novel's *mediator*. If necessary, from this search for a guide, or hero, N. will construct an entire world. That world, we discover while reading, is the world of the novel itself. Within that world, Girard's theory allows us to better understand the position that N. creates for himself in the unfolding *triangle of desire*.

¹³ As N. says late in the novel, “One must have heroes, which is to say, one must invent them” (Salter, p. 180).

Spontaneous Encounters

What may have been for the reader previously elusive, Salter throws headlong into the light. With the scene on the train, as N. sits across from the young woman, Salter shows us our first glimpse of his character's ultimate desire. This does not make matters easier for N. Once the reader witnesses his intentions, we must ask whether this narrator wants to portray a reliable account of these times.

On the train and elsewhere in the novel, N. finds himself at the centre of those circumstances that spark his desire. As with many of Salter's male characters—and with Salter himself, as we read in his memoir, *Burning the Days* (1997)—N. gravitates towards beautiful women. He also gravitates towards men whom he admires and would like to *imitate*. Such a desire, though never simplistic, is always simple. This, Girard tells us, is because “Desire is always spontaneous” (Girard 1965, p. 2). It is spontaneous in *A Sport and a Pastime* because N., much like Girard's *subject*, does not choose his *mediator*.

The spark that beckons N. to recount the story of his time in France, years after those events have unfolded, comes from what Girard labels a *spontaneous* encounter. For the very reason of its spontaneity, this discovery is beyond N.'s control. Yet Salter has set his course. The *subject* moves increasingly closer to his *mediator*, who will lead him towards the novel's *object*. The *mediator's* arrival, as Girard's theory demonstrates, must be *spontaneous*.

Salter has made N. a traveller whose purpose, like those of many travellers, becomes the journey itself. We witness that idea in the following lines of the Alexandrian Greek poet C.P. Cavafy's poem “Ithaka”:

As you set out on the journey to Ithaka,
wish that the way be long,

full of adventures, full of knowledge.

...

May there be many summer mornings

when with such pleasure, such joy,

you enter ports seen for the first time;

...

Always keep Ithaka in your mind.

Arriving there is your destination.

But don't hurry the journey at all.

Better if it lasts many years,

and you moor on the island when you are old,

rich with all you have gained along the way,

not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you the beautiful journey.

Without her you would not have set out on your way.

She has no more to give you.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka did not betray you.

With all your wisdom, all your experience,

You understand by now what Ithakas mean (Cavafy 2007, p. 34).

Though the concept of travel has changed, one thing persists: the traveller will experience chance, or *spontaneous*, encounters along his journey. These encounters allow slow revelations of the traveller's desires and, in doing so, give the traveller a better chance of experiencing change along the journey. The Odysseus who leaves the Trojan War is not the same man who returns—with the wisdom and experience the speaker of Cavafy's poem notes—ten years later, to Ithaka. The listener or reader of Homer's *Odyssey* would be disappointed if she were to discover, at the poem's end, the same man she met in the beginning. For the character's change initiates change in the reader, who, through a proper reading of Homer's epic, experiences the story and changes along with its characters.

Travel leads to *spontaneous* encounters. It is no surprise, then, that while travelling, N. meets one person (Dean, whom we will now view through Girard's theory as the *mediator*) and later, meets another (Anne-Marie, the *object*). All the while, he creates his world as he would like to see it through the lens of his camera. He takes photographs. He works as though he is in a studio, moulding his *spontaneous* encounters into the figures of his drama. He creates this drama much like a novelist constructs a novel. His retelling of these events becomes the novel we read, *A Sport and A Pastime*.

The world N. establishes through these spontaneous encounters and the *contact* with the figures who fuel this world merge with what we've already established about Girard's theory: "[I]t is not an object [Anne-Marie] which assures this contact; it is another consciousness [the *mediator*, Dean]. A third person indicates to the narrator the object he will begin desiring passionately" (Girard 1965, p. 30).

The arrival of this other consciousness creates a rupture in the narrative. In *A Sport and a Pastime*, this rupture at once heightens the narrative intensity and generates the multiple directions that the novel can take¹⁴. In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, Girard devotes much of his energy towards an examination of the relationship between *subject* and *mediator*. An analysis of the positioning of these two characters—*subject* and *mediator*—in Girard's theory of *triangular desire* is the most beneficial to the creative writer's understanding of character relationships and the development of the art of the novel. For *triangular desire* provides the creative writer with a model of how novelists develop their characters and how they have those characters interact with one another. The remainder of this chapter will explore the

¹⁴ Girard refers to these two possible directions as the *two spheres* that the novel can take.

relationship between the two characters whom Girard considers the most important in *triangular desire*.

The *Mediator's* Dual Purpose

First, there is Dean. Later, there is Anne-Marie. Always, there is N., the novel's consciousness and the *subject* of desire. When we meet N., he is in search of something that is predominantly indefinable. That "secret life of France" for which he claims to search is much like those "silent spaces" which Coetzee writes about in *Foe*¹⁵. These secrets and silences are present, always there. For N., they are seemingly obvious. Before the approach of "another consciousness," however, they lie just beyond N.'s grasp. He does not yet understand what occurs around him. He has not met the guide—that *mediator*—who will teach him to hear and comprehend that which has been, all along, seemingly obvious. Meeting the *mediator*, Girard's theory shows us, produces for the *subject* an opportunity to see his world anew. Such an opportunity allows the *subject* to undergo change.

The reader watches as the novelist works with these indefinable secrets and silences and develops them in the narrative in the same way a photographer develops film in a darkroom: the image burns onto the paper in the tray much like a swimmer surfaces from her depths, much as a good writer helps us to comprehend those ideas which had been heretofore been *seemingly* obvious yet just beyond our grasp.

The image in the developing tray grows distinct. The pieces of the novel fall into place. In the beginning, the narrative is haze and confusion. Girard's theory tells us that this is due to the *subject's* vague understanding of what he hopes to discover

¹⁵ "In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken, I believe. Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story" (Coetzee 1987, p. 141).

on his journey. Returning to the idea that Cavafy presents in “Ithaka,” the *subject* of a *novelistic novel* knows that a version of *Ithaka* awaits him. Much as the speaker of that poem tells us, the idea of an *Ithaka* gives the *subject* a vague direction; it prompts his reason for travel. The *subject* sets out on the journey, a lone traveller. He travels because he wants to discover what lies outside his daily routine, what lies beyond the person he is so that he can locate the person he will become. The *subject* must then attain the wisdom and experience that such a journey offers.

As readers, we should expect nothing less: a narrator who begins his journey with total understanding will not endure the trials that force him to seek redemption. A character unwilling to endure such trials will not reach the point that every novel must reach, where change can occur.¹⁶

The *mediator* approaches the *subject* at a point when the narrative must begin to focus. If the narrative remained in haze and confusion any longer, the reader would become bogged down by its lack of focus. And so the *mediator* approaches. With his approach, Girard informs us, the narrative intensifies.

This focus and intensification begins in *A Sport and a Pastime* when N. meets Dean. This *mediator* (Dean) gives the *subject* (N.) direction. Girard tell us that “As the mediator grows nearer, the directions become more precise” (Girard 1965, p. 84).

This other consciousness, Dean, the novel’s *mediator*, serves a dual purpose. For the *subject*, the *mediator* serves as both barrier and opportunity. Dean approaches N. at a party in Paris. What occurs is a collision between *subject* and *mediator*. In this collision, the *subject* gains a new understanding: his newfound desire, Girard’s theory

¹⁶ One contemporary writer, Nobel Prize-winner V.S. Naipaul, establishes this idea in the first two sentences of his novel *A Bend in the River*. “The world is what it is,” Naipaul writes; “men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it” (1989, p. 3)

informs us, is to *imitate*, or become a psychological double, of this new and *Other* consciousness. With the arrival of Dean, N. finds his way.

The *subject* draws closer to the *mediator* as much for his likenesses as his differences, we learn from Girard's theory. Because of this, a competition (rivalry) develops between the two. Who will survive? In their struggle, who will gain control over the novel's direction?

Girard's theory establishes that the novelist develops these questions through what occurs in *triangular desire*. *Triangular Desire* occurs when the *subject* and *mediator* encounter an *object*. Girard believes that *triangular desire* is the best lens (the lens through which the photographer gazes; the lens through which Salter reveals his story; the lens through which the reader perceives that story) for us to examine not only the *subject's* role but also what Dowie refers to as his "peculiar position" among the *mediator* and *object* (Dowie 1998, p. 59). It is also through the positioning of these characters, Girard believes, that the novelist connects his work to the great dialogue that is the art of the novel. For Girard's theory establishes that it is through the psychological doubling of the *subject* and *mediator* that the *novelistic novel* persists.¹⁷

Salter reveals Dean's presence on page 18 of a 180-page novel. Once Salter establishes the *mediator's* presence, that *mediator* is never far from N.'s thoughts. He is never far from the novel's main action, even when he is far from N.'s physical proximity. Girard's theory establishes that we long to be someone other than ourselves and that we long for something other than what we possess. Salter gives us a narrator/*subject*, N., who is discontented with his life. He has chosen to travel

¹⁷ As previously established, Girard defines *novelistic novels* as those works that reveal the presence of a mediator. Those works that do not reveal this presence, he defines as *romantic*.

because he longs to become someone other than himself. We do not reach this understanding of who we want to become on our own, however. As Girard writes, “Imitative desire is always a desire to be Another. The object is to the mediator what the relic is to a saint...The value of a relic depends on its closeness to the saint. It is the same with the object in [imitative] desire” (Girard 1965, p. 83). But what is this relic?

The *Relic*

“It is,” Girard writes, “the transcendent quality of a former desire which is relived on contact with a relic of the past. [This relic] has all of the virtues of a sacrament” (Girard, p. 80). N.’s photographs from years before—that time, in France, when he knew Dean and Anne-Marie—become his *relic*. This *relic* brings N. continually closer to his past. If not for the relic, he might have no reason to revisit that previous time. The entire novel revisits that time and, therefore, hinges on N.’s recovery of a *relic*. It is another way in which Salter’s novel ties directly to Girard’s theory.

The *Relic* Brings Forth the Other Characters in *Triangular Desire*

That theory establishes that contact with the *relic* draws the *subject* into the past. This happens with N. in *A Sport and a Pastime* much as it does to the character Diane Arbus (played by Nicole Kidman) in the film *Fur* (2006). Early in *Fur*, a minor character questions Arbus about a pendant that hangs from her neck. Arbus’s hand moves immediately to the pendant; without speaking, she touches the pendant. We can apply Girard’s theory to the *Fur* to see that the pendant is Arbus’s *relic*. Through Arbus’s reaction to the question, and her physical contact (she touches the pendant) with the relic, the viewer understands that the pendant has a transcendent quality.

After this moment, the screen fades to black. When the new scene emerges, the time and setting have changed. As viewers, we understand that we will not receive an immediate understanding of the pendant's origin. We know, rather, that the following scenes—which move back in time and occur *before* the character questions Arbus about her pendant—will give us clarification.

In *Fur*, the pendant connects Arbus to another person, a *mediator*. As in Girard's theory, this *mediator* approaches and clarifies the direction that Arbus's life will take. The *mediator*, who becomes a near-sacred figure in Arbus's life, gives her the *relic*. The *relic*, therefore, has the transcendent quality—"all of the virtues of a sacrament" (Girard 1965, p. 80).

As we see through this example from *Fur*, Girard's theory proves helpful to our understanding of much more than the *novelistic novel*. At the same time, it is yet another example of the way this theory benefits the creative writer, for the *relic* helps the writer develop and explore a character's motivations.

The *Relic* and Its Role in *Triangular Desire*

N.'s contact with the photographs/*relic* connect him to two other figures in Salter's novel. As Dowie notes in *James Salter*, *triadic* relationships in Salter's work usually involve two men and the woman whom they both love. This is what occurs in *A Sport and a Pastime*. But let us examine another example of Salter's use of "triadic relationships" (Dowie 1998, p. 54) with our new knowledge of Girard's theory in order to understand that we can observe *triangular desire* in more places in Salter's fiction than just *A Sport and a Pastime*.

In the story "Platinum" from Salter's collection *Last Night*, a married man has an affair with his son-in-law's mistress. Each man competes for the woman's

affection. Each desires her; their desire grows stronger when they discover that they are not alone in the relationship but, rather, competing for her affection. As in Girard's theory, each man's desire grows stronger—more focused—when the *mediator* arrives. In the case of “Platinum,” each man serves as the other's *mediator*. Each becomes more obsessed with the woman when he realises that an Other desires her passionately.¹⁸ In the process of this discovery, the two men imitate Girard's theory by becoming psychological doubles of one another. As we saw earlier in this chapter, the two men compete for the dual possibilities for the life the woman could have. For this reason, they become dual possibilities of the direction the story can take. What ensues in this *double model*, Girard writes, is an “adoring hatred, this admiration that insults and even kills its object” (Girard 1965, p. 42). Besides their desire for the woman, each man must keep secrets: the son-in-law cannot tell his wife that her father is having an affair without exposing his own illicit involvement with the woman. It is for this reason, also, that the father cannot tell his daughter of her husband's betrayals. Doing so would expose his own relations with the woman.

Much like *A Sport and a Pastime*, “Platinum” goes so far as to echo Girard's theory by including a sacred *relic*: earrings, a gift the father-in-law gives his daughter. One evening after the two have made love, the mistress asks the husband/son-in-law to borrow these earrings. The *relic* is recovered (or exposed) in the story. The father-in-law recognizes on his mistress the gift he gave his daughter.

We can apply Girard's theory to the eighteen-page story “Platinum” to witness how the *relic* functions much as the respective *relics* function in the novels of Cervantes or Dostoyevsky or Proust: the *relic*'s purpose is to connect, in some way, the characters involved in *triangular desire*. It also forms the basis for the rivalry that

¹⁸ As Girard writes, this is because “A third person indicates to the narrator the object he will begin desiring passionately” (30).

develops between *subject* and *mediator*. The presence of this *relic*, and the struggle over it (in “Platinum,” the son-in-law’s decision to please his mistress by allowing her to wear his wife’s earrings; the father-in-law’s sudden awareness, when he sees his mistress wearing the earrings that he bought for his daughter, of the son-in-law’s affair with *his own* mistress) rests at the heart of *triangular desire*.

As in “Platinum” and other Salter stories, such as “American Express,” “Comet” and in several chapters of the author’s autobiography, *Burning the Days*, the triadic relationships involve two men (most often, the *subject* and *mediator*) and a woman (*object*). Though something more complicated occurs in *A Sport and a Pastime* (N. desires Anne-Marie, but unlike Dean, his is not the sexual desire to *possess*, as it is in the aforementioned stories), the interaction among the three characters in *triangular desire* need not have romantic undertones. Ultimately, Girard’s theory establishes that the beloved (romantic or not) must be an *object* of desire.¹⁹ And the triangle that she moves in remains nothing more than “a model of a sort, or rather a whole family of models. But these models,” Girard writes, “... always allude to the mystery, transparent yet opaque, of human relations” (1965, pp. 2-3).

Girard believes that the model of *triangular desire* provides us with the basic idea from which one can “rediscover everything” about the art of the novel (1965, p. 52). For the beginning novelist, nothing could be more important than understanding the “mystery, transparent yet opaque, of human relations” (Girard 1965, pp. 2-3). Girard’s theory, therefore, establishes a model in which we can examine the relationships among characters so that we can “rediscover everything” about the art of

¹⁹ In Salter’s first novel, *The Hunters*, the fighter pilots in the Korean War (a mix of *subjects* and *mediators*) share a single *object* of desire: they all wish to achieve glory by shooting down Russian MiGs. Further study could apply Girard’s theory of *triangular desire* to the pilots and the enemy aircraft that they attempt to ‘kill.’

the novel (Girard 1965, p. 52). Such a theory is indispensable for the beginning novelist.

Dual Possibilities

Let us return to *triangular desire* as it develops in *A Sport and a Pastime*. Early in the novel, N. chooses a model to *imitate*. He meets this model, Phillip Dean, at a party. N. listens to Dean tell another guest about his recent car trip through Spain. All the while, N. watches. He is present in the room. Yet he is not present. He is a voyeur. There, at the party, he narrates this scene as though he were an omniscient narrator. After being prodded with questions about his recent car trip through Spain, Dean grows suddenly silent. Through his silence, Salter establishes him as someone who would choose action over words. Already we see how he differs from N. This *difference* provides the beginning of the dual possibilities that the novel develops.

Of Dean's reaction to the continuing questions, N. says: "I envy the silence which somehow doesn't disgrace him, which is curiously beautiful, like a loyalty we do not share" (Salter 1995, p. 18). Salter's word choice—*envy*—makes his intentions clear. Yet in the same sentence, N. shows that his response to Dean is much more complex: the man's silence is "curiously beautiful" (Salter 1995, p. 19). Through Dean's silence, N. comprehends a *loyalty we do not share*: this loyalty is essential if we are to understand the alternate possibilities that these two characters encourage during their eventual competition for control over the novel's direction and which Girard calls the *double model*.

The *Double Model*

This *mediator*, as Girard defines him, enters the narrative and provides the hero with a model to copy. “[E]verything about the desire which is copied, including its intensity, depends upon the desire which serves as model,” Girard writes (1965, p. 7). With this mediation, Girard marks a key difference in the manner in which novels develop.

The rivalry between mediator and the person who desires constitutes an essential difference between [Julien Sorel’s desire in *The Red and the Black*] and that of Don Quixote, or of Emma Bovary. Amadis cannot vie with Don Quixote in the protection of orphans in distress....he cannot slaughter giants in his place....In most of Stendhal’s desires, the mediator himself desires the object, or could desire it: it is even this very desire, real or presumed, which makes this object infinitely desirable in the eyes of the subject. The mediation begets a second desire exactly the same as the mediator’s. This means that one is always confronted with two *competing* desires. The mediator can no longer act his role of model without also acting or appearing to act the role of obstacle (1965, p. 7).

To undergo the kind of experience necessary for change to occur, the *subject* and *mediator*—those two spheres of the novel’s *possibility*—must interrogate one another. The *mediator*, as Girard informs us, is both model and obstacle. This interrogation often unfolds as though it were a physical or emotional duel. This, Girard writes, is because “The approach of the mediator tends to bring together the two spheres of *possibilities*, of which the rivals occupy the respective centers. The resentment they feel for each other is therefore always increasing” (1965, p. 40). “In the shadow of Dean’s power,” Dowie writes, “the narrator recedes to spectator, as such a perfect vehicle for telling the story on the practical level and a perfect audience surrogate on the imaginative level” (1998, p. 54).²⁰

Fiction equals conflict. The resentment the *subject* and *mediator* develop for one another is, therefore, necessary for the tension that must build in order for the

²⁰ The same can be said of another narrator, Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*, whose presence aboard the *Pequod* becomes that of spectator. This enables him, Girard tells us, to narrate all the more clearly the characters and action that takes place around him.

work of fiction to survive. The resentment, Girard writes, is “always increasing” (1965, p. 40). For this reason, teachers of creative writing often use the description of a jet—its takeoff, flight and landing—as a model when discussing story arc with their students. The story, like a jet, must also launch itself. Somewhere in the flight, the jet (story) undergoes turbulence (conflict). That conflict is then resolved; the jet either crashes or lands.

In the works Girard investigates in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, the matter of rivalry between *subject* and *mediator* remains constant. But some contemporary novelists take this rivalry one step further than does Salter. Rather than show these interactions among the novel’s characters, these novelists often choose to comment directly on the rivalry and its ensuing *triangular desire*.

In *A Fraction of the Whole*, for instance, debut novelist Steve Toltz writes of the way that such a rivalry (between *mediator* and *subject*) functions in storytelling: “I hate how no one can tell the story of his life without making a star of his enemy,” one of the novel’s narrators, Jasper Dean, says, “but that’s just the way it is” (2008, p. 6). The events in Toltz’s narrative reflect this statement, in which the narrator places the hero and the enemy into a single role, which Girard’s theory tells us belongs to that of the *mediator*. Later in the novel, Toltz notes that “...a significant part of having a hero is imaging his heroic deeds as your own” (2008, p. 45). We can relate this statement directly to N.’s initial fascination with Dean, whom he sees as a school-boy hero.

Two other contemporary writers, Brock Clarke and Alex Miller, also comment directly on the nature of *imitation* in the *novelistic novel*. In his novella *The Sitters*, Miller writes, “There’s no limit to our vanity. We’re all impersonating the person we’d like to be like” (1995, p. 73). And Clarke’s narrator of *An Arsonist’s Guide to Writers’ Homes of New England* ponders triangular relationships within the family

unit. He writes, “Because this is what it also means to be in a family: to have two of its members break the family and then wait around for a third to make it whole again” (2008, p. 107).

The ideas in *A Sport and a Pastime* and the contemporary works quoted above tie directly to Girard’s notion that the “mediator and the subject occupy the respective centers” of the novel (Girard 1965, p. 40). Their rivalry, and the tension it creates, subsists on the fact that one cannot *outdo* the other. Their occupation of these “respective centers” implies an equality that prohibits one from prevailing easily over the other (Girard 1965, p. 40).

This is because the mediator’s role is dual: he serves as both model and obstacle. This dual role is the *double model*. Girard calls what ensues in this *double model* an “adoring hatred, this admiration that insults and even kills its object” (Girard 1965, p. 42). We see N.’s admiration and hatred of Dean in *A Sport and a Pastime* from their first meeting. Yet N.’s admiration for his rival persists. The hatred is present only because the *subject* is envious of something the *mediator* possesses. This something in *A Sport and a Pastime* includes not only Dean’s charm.²¹ The hero/*subject imitates* the desires that he sees in the *Other*. This imitation becomes a desire to possess.

Irresistible Attraction

N. sees something in the *Other*, in Dean, that he admires. His initial attraction to Dean stems from curiosity: he finds something exotic about the lone young man travelling by car through Europe. It is important to note here that, before he meets Dean, N. travelled alone through Europe. Such travelling does not become exotic to N.’s mind,

²¹ N. falls immediately under Dean’s charm. Upon their first meeting, N. says of Dean, “It is of school-boy heroes that I am thinking” (Salter 1995, p.).

however, until he witnesses it in the *Other*. Immediately after one character, Cristina, turns the conversation to Dean, N. begins to admire the younger American. This is because, as Girard's theory tells us, it takes another person, in this case Cristina, to give the *subject* a sense of direction. With the scene on the train earlier in the novel, when N. constructed a life for the young woman who sat across from him in the carriage, Salter established N.'s proclivity for invention. That proclivity returns when, at the party, he begins to imagine "a young man in the dun-colored cities of late afternoon. Valencia. Trees line the great avenues. Seville at night, the smell of dust that has settled, the smell of oleander, richer, green. In front of the big hotel two porters are hosing the sidewalk" (Salter 1995, p. 19). These imaginings—which extend, ever so briefly, from Dean's experience to the lives of those porters who come into contact with the young American—of Dean's life and travels prompt N. to think of "school boy heroes" (Salter 1995, p. 19).

Through this latter admission, Salter leaves no doubt that, upon meeting Dean, N.'s desire to imitate Dean quickens. It is a desire at once simple (admitting a desire to imitate a school boy hero) and complex (recognising that in this possible hero there are "loyalties we do not share" (Salter 1995, p. 19). At once, it seems that N. acknowledges both aspects—the dual possibilities—of what this encounter entails. N. has at last found the *Other* for whom he has been searching. The character Cristina has served as a *mediator*, introducing him to Dean.

Through his desire to imitate, N. begins to see himself and others differently. He begins to see things, that is, as though he has suddenly become someone else. It is no accident that Salter has N. stand back like an omniscient presence/voyeur in the room as he observes Dean during that first meeting. N. remains removed from the conversation while simultaneously commenting on it. Here we can note that N.

exercises other, similar observations even before he meets his *mediator*, or the *Other* whom he wishes to imitate. Even in the first chapter, while on board the train bound from Paris for the French countryside, he says, “It seems I am seeing everything more clearly. The details of a whole world are being opened for me” (Salter 1995, p. 7). This observation arrives *after* N. imagines the life of the young woman who sits across from him. Only *after* he provides the young woman with a job, an entire life—thus establishing his desire to delve not only into the secret life of France but also the secret life of those he encounters on his travels—does he see ‘everything more clearly’ and understand that “The details of a whole world are being opened...” (Salter 1995, p. 7). Only through his imaginings—that *peculiar position* that he places himself in, as Dowie notes—will N. see clearly (Dowie 1998, 54).

Salter places the above scene on pages six and seven of his 182-page novel. In doing so, he sets the reader up for what occurs several chapters later, at the party when N. first sees Dean. Salter has established the necessary groundwork for the arrival of the *mediator*. N. has been unfocused, until now. The ever-nearing presence of the *mediator* heightens his focus. For the arrival of his *mediator* marks the beginning of a new understanding. N. begins to comprehend the *reasons* for his new perceptions. This is because once the *subject* meets the *mediator*, he can then surrender himself. Girard calls this a surrendering of “the individual’s fundamental prerogative” (1965, p 1). Once this surrendering occurs, Girard writes, the individual “no longer chooses the objects of his own desire” (1965, p. 1). A weight is lifted. And so N.’s desires focus. With that focus, the narrative also focuses and intensifies. As Girard’s theory states, this can occur only when the *mediator* and *subject* draw closer to one another.

The *Mediator* as Filter

In these terms, the *mediator* works much like a filter. If the *subject* learns to see things in a new way, it is because the *subject* sees those things with the aid of the *mediator*. This filter allows the narrative focus to grow clearer. In the case of *A Sport and a Pastime*, this filter/*mediator* works much like a camera, which is a filter between the photographer and the world. Here again, we can note similarities between Girard's theory and the action within Salter's novel. As N. tells us near the novel's end, in a section that shows N.'s understanding of what he has lived through his rediscovery of this *relic* of his past: "One must have heroes, which is to say, one must create them" (Salter 1995, p. 180).

Heroes are often *created* through the act of being represented through a particular medium. It takes little imagination to witness how this occurs through the medium of cinema, the exploits of whose stars we read about in the check-out line or hear of while waiting in the queue for our morning coffee. We can also apply the example of a hero being *created* through the medium of photography. As Girard writes of those who imitate another's desires: "they choose substitute gods because they are not able to give up infinity" (1965, p. 65). We choose our *substitute gods*, then—movie stars or musicians, all of those supposed 'heroes' whose lives we will never understand, though we go to great lengths to read about and examine, like voyeurs (much like N.), their images so that we may try to live (again, like N.) vicariously through them. The images of these figures are preserved on film. Such preservation encourages us to bestow immortality on the figures. James Dean, preserved on black-and-white film as he struts down Broadway, is eternally twenty-four years old. Looking at an image of the young actor, dead for more than fifty years

without having aged a day: it is no wonder that we desire to step closer towards such immortality.

The *Subject* Surrenders his “Fundamental Prerogative”

There is a point in each *novelistic novel*, Girard believes, in which the *subject* surrenders his “fundamental prerogative” (1965, p. 1). We can view this *fundamental prerogative* as the character’s free will; upon meeting the *mediator*, the *subject* surrenders his free will and allows that *mediator* to choose for him.

Let us move forward, to the end of *A Sport and a Pastime* in order to witness the totality of change that occurs. Though the surrendering of his *fundamental prerogative* begins during the party—N.’s first contact with Dean—it is not until the novel’s end that the *subject* grasps the ultimate consequences of his decision. The *subject*’s surrendering does not occur immediately; N. must feel as though he retains control over his emotions and decisions. The ultimate explanation, and the height of the rivalry that builds throughout the novel between *subject* and *mediator*, does not unfold until later. It isn’t until the penultimate paragraph that N. understands: he is not, nor was he ever, “strong enough” (Salter 1995, p. 167) to be Anne-Marie’s lover. Whether on his own or with the help of his *mediator*, he realises that he could never have possessed what he desired.

Watching [Dean] eat, I am plagued by this. Gradually, I sink into a fine, a delicate hatred. I no longer hear what he says. I am only conscious of my own thoughts and the sound of his teeth chewing bread. He reeks of assurance. We are all at his mercy. We are subject to his friendship, his love. It is the principles of this world to which we respond, which we seek to find in ourselves. It is his power which I cannot even identify, which is flickering, sometimes present and sometimes not—without it he is empty, a body without breath, as ordinary as my own reflection in the mirror—it is this power which guarantees his existence, even afterwards, even when he is gone (Salter 1995, p. 167).

In *Agnes' Final Afternoon*, a study of the fiction of the Franco-Czech writer Milan Kundera, Francois Ricard writes: "the hero goes through the world like a blind man, then leaves it just when he regains sight; his conversion—his healing—thus ends the novel" (2003, p. 21). It is for this reason, Ricard writes, that "all great novels end with a renunciation of metaphysical desire" (2003, p.18). In the above passage from *A Sport and a Pastime*, the reader witnesses N.'s renunciation of what Ricard calls *metaphysical desire*. N. has already surrendered his *fundamental prerogative*. He is not asking for a return of his old life but instead a renunciation of that life. This makes him capable of moving on, from this moment, to inhabit that life that awaits. This is because, as Girard writes, "Every hero of a novel expects his being to be radically changed by the act of possession" (1965, p. 53).

After the initial surrendering of his *fundamental prerogative*, N. discovers the chance to change and to seek a new path. The *renunciation of metaphysical desire* enables such change to occur. From the moment of such renunciation, there is no turning back. The hero/*subject* will not revert to his former self. He has reached a new understanding, and it is at this stage of his life that we leave him, closing the page on his self-discovery. This is the point that each novel must reach. The hero must undergo change, for, without such change, there can be no chance of redemption.

One recent, consummate example of such change—or *character arc*, as writers often refer to it—occurs in J.M. Coetzee's Booker Prize-winning novel *Disgrace*. Coetzee's main character, David Lurie, is a professor of literature who is dismissed from his job after the revelation of a sexual relationship that he has carried on with a student. Lurie is offered a chance to defend himself before the university ethics committee. Yet Coetzee's hero remains cold, detached from his actions, and unwilling—uninterested, even—to defend himself against the charges before him.

Through the first half of the novel, long after the committee hands down its decision, Lurie maintains his detached position. It is not until the novel's darkest moment, a violent act that involves both Lurie and his daughter, that Lurie comes face to face with the wall that is present in every novel. The reader must see whether the character chooses to scale that wall or remain on the side where he has lived throughout his life. Will there be change or not? With the approach of this wall, Lurie's life is thrown into disorder. Before this moment, Lurie has seen no reason to change. He is content among his collection of classical music and books, his current project, the book that he writes when inspiration strikes. But he has come face to face with the wall: the violent physical attack he suffers represents the wall. The attack and its aftermath force him to seek a new understanding of himself.

From the opening sentence of *Disgrace*—"For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well" (Coetzee 2000, p. 3)—Coetzee shows us Lurie as a man who lives a life of the mind. Sex, for Lurie, is a 'problem.' Coetzee's clause-riddled opening sentence returns 'to [Lurie's] mind' and shows us that, for his main character, this human act must be solved as though it were a 'problem.' A different character might see sex as instinctive, human. But that is not the character Coetzee gives us on the novel's opening page. With his opening sentence, Coetzee establishes the novel's contract. As readers of novels, we understand that part of this contract establishes that the character we meet in the beginning will not be the character we leave at the novel's end. He will be changed through the course of ensuing events, those trials and tribulations necessary for fiction to survive. At the end of *Disgrace*, therefore, we find Lurie in a place he never imagined he would find himself: he has become a euthaniser of dogs. How does this

change occur, and why? More importantly, what change has he experienced in order to undergo such change?

These are the fundamental questions that rest at the centre of Coetzee's novel, which fits Girard's definition of *novelistic novel* because it reveals a *mediator*, in at least one form, through the attack and attackers at the farm. Once Lurie is attacked, he surrenders his *fundamental prerogative*. By doing so, his life changes, as N.'s life changes in *A Sport in a Pastime* when he meets his own *mediator*.

In *Disgrace*, Lurie does not choose to be attacked, along with his daughter, on the farm in the country outside of Cape Town. Unlike the events that unfold at the university, in Lurie's highly ordered, intellectual world (the reason that, in the novel's opening, we find a character who lives the life of the mind; the reason we find him, in the beginning, regarding sex not as instinctive but, rather, as 'a problem'), the attack occurs without his consent. The attackers are not students whom he could reprimand for their misbehaviour or poor preparation. Yet even after the violence that unfolds on the farm, Lurie cannot return order to his world. His face has been burned; he has been unable to help his daughter in her struggle with what happened while she was in the other room because the attackers have locked him in the toilet. Coetzee proves masterful in his juxtaposition of the guarded professor we find in the novel's opening with this man who has no control over his mind or the situation and is, therefore, unable to help his daughter. In doing so, he shows how one man's ordered world is ruptured. From the moment of this rupture, everything changes.

I believe *Disgrace* is a consummate example of how a contemporary novelist places his hero in a situation that forces such change. What occurs in Coetzee's novel, much like what unfolds in *A Sport and a Pastime*, allows us to return to Girard's theory: "Every hero of a novel expects his being to be radically changed by the act of

possession” (Girard 1965, p. 53). This struggle for possession rests at the heart of the *novelistic novel*. And understanding this struggle—how it begins and unfolds—proves beneficial to any novelist writing what Girard terms a *novelistic novel*.

Conclusion

According to Girard’s theory, the hero is given direction by another. Note the passive voice: such passivity is essential for understanding what occurs when the *subject* surrenders his *fundamental prerogative*. For the hero does not choose the object that he will gravitate towards. Another chooses for him. The hero then follows the lead this mediator provides.

This is much like what occurs to N. after he meets Dean at the party. After he receives this direction, after the rupture that ensures, N. develops a clearer understanding of himself and what he needs to possess if he is to comprehend his desires, if he is to see things more clearly and continue his voyeurism.

A door opens. Once the *subject* surrenders his fundamental prerogative, Girard writes, he “pursues objects which are determined for him, or at least seem to be determined for him, by the model of all chivalry. We shall call this model the *mediator of desire*” (1965, p. 2). N. has found the perfect model in Dean. N. pursues this model. Therefore, he *acts*. As we have seen, and as Girard’s theory demonstrates, these *actions* are necessary for the *subject* to experience redemption and, in the process, undergo change.

In *A Sport and a Pastime*, N. begins to see things more clearly as soon as a mediator enters the narrative and chooses an object for him. This connects Salter’s novel directly to Girard’s theory. It is also at this point that his world ruptures, splitting into two possibilities. This relationship between *subject* and *mediator*—their

struggle for control over the novel's direction and for the radical change that they expect to undergo through the act of possession (Girard 1965, p. 53)—stands as the most important in Girard's model of *triangular desire*. Salter's "peculiar positioning" (Dowie 1998, p. 59) of his *subject* and *mediator* at once allows us to use Girard's theory in order to further understand *A Sport and a Pastime*. At the same time, through his *peculiar positioning* of these characters, Salter's novel takes Girard's theory in a new direction and provides future implications for the study of the model of *triangular desire*.

Chapter Four: How useful is Girard's theory to the creation of the candidate's creative project, a novel titled *The Landscape of Desire*?

Predecessors

"Each novelist, each novel must invent its own form," Alain Robbe-Grillet writes in *Notes Toward a New Novel*. "No recipe can replace this continual reflection" (McKeon ed. 2000, p. 809). As we have seen through this examination of Girard's theory of the *novelistic novel*, each novel arrives not as a reinvention of the form itself but as a continuation of the dialogue, begun with Cervantes, that constitutes the art of the novel.

About his own experiences as a beginning novelist, Robbe-Grillet writes, "What most astounded me, in reproaches as in praise, was to encounter in almost every case an implicit—or even explicit—reference to the great novels of the past, which were always held up as the model on which the young writer should keep his eyes fixed...From Flaubert to Kafka, a line of descent is drawn, an ancestry that suggests a progeny" (McKeon ed 2000, p. 809).

As Girard writes of his basic conceit in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, "...the great writers apprehend intuitively and concretely, through the medium of their art, if not formally, the system in which they were first imprisoned together with their contemporaries" (1965, p. 3). That *prison* constitutes the art of the novel.

My position in this exegesis has not been that of a theorist. Rather, as a PhD candidate in creative writing—a beginning practitioner of the novel's art, one who recognises the line of descent, the ancestry and progeny that Robbe-Grillet mentions—I

have examined the narrative technique that Salter employs in *A Sport and a Pastime* as a model on which to fix my eyes. How, that is, can a beginning novelist learn from another's success and failures? What is Girard's theory of *triangular desire*, and how can a beginning novelist benefit from an understanding of this theory? Can we observe Girard's theory in Salter's novel? Finally: How will Girard's theory and examination of its use in the work of Cervantes, Dostoyevsky, Flaubert, Stendhal and Proust—those authors whose places in the literary canon are firm and whom Girard's focus centres on in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*—assist me to understand and develop the relationships among the three main characters in my own novel, *The Landscape of Desire*? Does *The Landscape of Desire* present a *subject*, *mediator* and *object*?

Triangular Desire in The Landscape of Desire

In *The Landscape of Desire*, a young woman, Julia Matthews, falls in love first with one man, William John Wills, and later with another, Robert O'Hara Burke. *The Landscape of Desire* is set in Ireland, Austria, Italy, Germany and America. Its time period ranges from the 1840s to the 1890s. Mainly, however, it is set in Australia, in the Victorian countryside, and concerns the key figures involved in the ill-fated Burke and Wills Expedition²².

At the height of Julia Matthews's romance with Burke, Wills secures a position that will take him from one end of Australia to another. He has been selected as the surveyor of the Victorian Exploring Expedition. Should this expedition prove

²² In 1861, a group of explorers, led by Robert O'Hara Burke, set out to traverse the Australian continent. Of the four explorers who journeyed to the expedition's northernmost point near the Gulf of Carpentaria, only one man, John King, survived to tell the tale.

successful, it will be the first in history to cross the Australian interior from south to north.

Wills knows little about Burke, the man who will be his leader on this expedition. At some point before the party departs from Melbourne, however, Wills learns that his new leader, Burke, is the man whom Julia turned to once he, Wills, jilted her in favour of pursuing his career.

Through the journey into the heart of the continent, Wills keeps his knowledge of Burke's relationship with Matthews to himself. Wills does not inform Burke of his prior relations with Julia Matthews. This, despite his knowledge of Burke's repeated travels back to Melbourne, once the expedition is in progress, in order to see Julia perform on stage in her latest play. For her part, Julia does not tell Burke of her previous relationship with his surveyor, William John Wills. And so all the while, as the journey progresses northward, Burke never knows that his beloved once loved the very man who guides him across the continent.

This knowledge and its tension pass between the woman (using Girard's theory, we will label her the *object* of desire) and the surveyor, Wills. *The Landscape of Desire* employs Girard's theory but also tries to add something new in order to extend, in some way, the dialogue of the art of the novel. While the figures (*subject*, *mediator*, *object*) Girard examines typically fill one role in *triangular desire*, Wills is not wholly *subject* or *mediator*. He is, at different times in the novel, a combination of the two. His movement between these roles adds another dimension to the possibilities of *triangular desire* as it develops in the *novelistic novel*. Adding yet another dimension to the possibilities of Girard's theory, the character Burke also occupies, at different times in the narrative, the various roles of *subject* and *mediator*, as well.

What occurs among these three characters, therefore, coincides with Girard's theory: the reader can always trace a straight line to each of the three major players in the triangle: Burke, Wills and Julia Matthews. "The object changes with each adventure," as Girard writes, "but the triangle remains" (1965, p. 2).

In *The Landscape of Desire*, the *object* that Girard mentions above shifts from Julia Matthews to the Australian landscape. Doing so supplies the novel's title with one example of what Girard means when he refers to the *dual possibilities* that the *mediator* presents and which this exegesis examined in the previous chapter. For the landscape is both physical (the desire to conquer the Australian desert) and emotional (for Julia Matthews). Each aspect—the explorers' desire for Julia Matthews; their desire to prove successful in their journey—competes for control over the narrative. This is much the same in *A Sport and a Pastime*. Phillip Dean and N. compete for the affection of Anne-Marie while simultaneously competing for a control that is much less tangible: control over the destiny of the narrative itself.

3.

Something else occurs in *The Landscape of Desire* that extends Girard's theory. Wills's knowledge and his loyalty to the expedition and, therefore, to his leader, prevents him from denying Burke his hopes to cross the continent. Even when Wills finally understands that Burke's hopes are foolish—and that, should the expedition continue northward men will die—he remains loyal to Burke. This, despite the fact that the surveyor knows of the futility of such a mission. This is because Wills's loyalty stays always with his *object* of desire.²³ On the expedition, he becomes the *subject* and Burke, the *mediator*. The *subject* understands that the expedition will

²³ As stated earlier, the *object* shifts from Julia Matthews to the Australian desert.

never succeed; yet he has surrendered his *fundamental prerogative* to Burke, his leader. Burke has become his *mediator*. Now that Wills has surrendered his free will, he allows Burke to choose his path for him; he begins to see the journey through that *mediator's* eyes.

This means that the *mediator* has won narrative control; the *object* whom Burke and Wills originally competed over (though without Burke's knowledge that there has been a competition, for he knows nothing of Wills's involvement with Julia) has been a single *object*: Julia Matthews. The *object* of desire in the *triangle* (of which Burke and Wills move between the roles of *mediator* or *subject*) now shifts from that *object* to another, the landscape.

The surveyor (Wills) and leader (Burke) develop the kind of rivalry that Girard discovers in the relationship between *subject* and *mediator*. It is the relationship that his theory deems most important, for he focuses his study on the *novelistic novel*, or those works that reveal the presence of a *mediator*. Though they shift between the roles of *subject* and *mediator*, Burke and Wills occupy respective centres within the novel. Girard calls this the *double model*. The *double model* of their relationship consists of an "adoring hatred, this admiration that insults and even kills its object" (Girard 1965, p. 42). Among the three in the *triangle*, the leader alone remains unaware of the surveyor's previous relationships with the *object*. For Burke, others in the novel come and go in their attempt to gain Julia's attention and, in doing so, fill the third point necessary for the triangle to form. In doing so, the novel maintains Girard's theory that "desire is always spontaneous" (Girard 1965, p.2) persists. That *spontaneous* desire, Girard writes, "can always be portrayed by a simple straight line which joins subject and object" (1965, p. 2).

For this reason—and here *The Landscape of Desire* breaks from Girard's theory—Burke does not require the presence of a *mediator* to choose the *object* of his desire. In a situation that does not involve Julia Matthews, the third-person narrator says of Burke, “Until now, he has stood on the margins and watched as others have decided his fate. Why should this be any different?”

This quote shows that Burke, as a *subject*, has surrendered his *fundamental prerogative*, or free will, long before the arrival of either a *mediator* or his *object* of desire, Julia Matthews, who is only one of a string of *objects* who have filled Burke's life. In the first moment Burke sees Julia Matthews (on stage, performing in a play) he chooses her. He does not need to see things through the filter of another, a *mediator*, in order to make this decision. But, as we see in the above quote, Burke is not someone used to choosing; throughout his life, others have chosen for him: his time in the Austrian Army; his role as police inspector; even his involvement with the Exploring Expedition, all of which *The Landscape of Desire* examines. Still, now that he has decided to choose—or more precisely: now that he has *made up his mind*—Burke is not prepared to take the final step: he is not prepared to act. For most of the novel, Burke is prepared to proceed much as does N. throughout *A Sport and a Pastime*: as a voyeur. He is content to watch the actress from the seats of her audience. The *subject* stays this way until the arrival of a minor *mediator*. As with N. and the young woman on the train in *A Sport and a Pastime*, that *mediator* clarifies Burke's direction and, therefore, the direction of the novel as a whole.

4.

A *mediator* arrives for Burke in Beechworth, near the end of the two-week run of Julia Matthews's latest play. Burke sits each night in the audience, learning the words

and music of the actress's songs. Beside him on this night, the penultimate performance, are seated several children, young girls who sit in awe of Julia Matthews, the play's star. The children regard the actress, as soon as she enters the stage, as someone they would like to *imitate*. This is because they see her through a *mediator*, the stage. They see the actress through the filter of her medium: theatre. This filter heightens the intensity of their experience. The following quote describes their experience:

It is as simple as that, her arrival. With this glowing-haired girl, [the children] sense a private bond. Her clothes fit perfectly. She is not as old as their parents, not ancient. She is not someone who would be oblivious to their thoughts and needs. Nor is she their age, a child pushed always to the periphery. At once, they seem to accept that she possesses knowledge of their lives that even they, aged six through ten, have not yet fathomed, though she is exactly the kind of woman they imagine themselves becoming (Rabalais, creative project p. 200).

Sitting beside these children is Burke. He eventually becomes aware of the change in their demeanour upon Julia's appearance. In this process, the young girls serve as *mediators* for Burke, who remains throughout the scene a *subject*. In this scene, he sees Julia Matthews through the filter of the children's eyes. Whereas in Girard's theory, the *mediator* is an individual character, *The Landscape of Desire* differs from that theory, in this case, by allowing the group of children to fill the role of one point in the *triangle of desire*.

The novel further complicates the use of *triangular desire* as Girard defines it: Burke has recently come for the first time into contact with another *mediator/rival*. After the previous night's performance, a young man—whom, Burke recognises, is younger and more handsome than himself—has placed a rose at Julia Matthews's feet as she bowed before the audience.

Within the space of several pages, Burke finds himself occupying two realms of *triangular desire*. He begins to see things clearly because he has come into contact

with, in the space of two days, two separate *mediators*. Both *mediators* compete with Burke for the same *object*, Julia Matthews. In doing so, they heighten Burke's awareness of the desirability of this *object*. For these *mediators* have all become entranced with some version of what the narrator observes about the actress:

The light that precedes and follows certain people, privilege that comes not from ethic or work but instead from presence alone, as though beauty were her greatest talent. Some will say it is all she has. Beauty like some hard-earned achievement. She knows the range of its effects. If necessary, she is prepared to hold it over everyone she meets (Rabalais, creative project, p. 200)

For much of the novel, Burke remains ignorant that another, others, admire his *object*. It is not until the *mediators*—the rose-giver, in one instance; the children, in the other—enter the narrative that Burke builds the courage to act. In this way, the novel coincides with Girard's theory that "As the mediator grows nearer, the directions become more precise" (Girard 1965, p. 84).

And so with these *directions*, Burke focuses, eventually proposing marriage to Julia Matthews. From that moment on, his focus does not diminish. His aims are to conquer the landscape so that he can return to Melbourne and possess Julia Matthews.

Conclusion

The above instances of *triangular desire* are two of many that appear in *The Landscape of Desire*. In its examination of Girard's theory as Salter employs it in *A Sport and a Pastime*, I have weighed the benefits of that theory and, much like Burke thinks about the facts of his own life, moulded that theory to the creative component of this degree. Much as Robbe-Grillet writes in *Notes Toward a New Novel*, I have done so, as a beginning novelist, in an attempt to extend, in whatever way possible, the dialogue that is the art of the novel. By doing so, I have shown that Girard's

theory not only remains useful but creates much room for further investigation in the field of literary studies.

Conclusion

If there's one thing I've always known, it's that literature is a long apprenticeship that is always open to imperfection when things go well, to perfection when things go badly, and to risk at all times—if we are to deserve what we write.

(Fuentes 1995, p. 167)

My examination in this exegesis of Girard's theory of *triangular desire* has established how essential and flexible that theory remains for the creative writer, four decades after its initial publication. Like the study of medicine or law or the culinary arts, literature is, as Fuentes notes, a “long apprenticeship” (Fuentes 1995, p. 167). For this reason, the beginning writer will want, at the beginning of that apprenticeship, to arm herself with the knowledge that encourages “risk at all times,” as Fuentes writes, so that she can *deserve* what she writes (Fuentes 1995, p. 167).

This exegesis has shown that Girard's theory remains essential for the following reason. As Girard writes early in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, “All the ideas of the Western novel are present in germ in *Don Quixote*. And the idea of these ideas, the idea whose central role is constantly being confirmed, the basic idea from which one can rediscover everything [about the art of the novel] is triangular desire” (Girard 1965, p. 57). Contained in one book, Girard's theory supplies readers and creative writers with a knowledge of the novel's lineage. This lineage informs the beginning novelist that she is not alone. As B.S. Johnson writes in the introduction to *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?*, literature is “a relay race, the baton of innovation passing from one generation to another” (1973 , p.30).

Girard's theory details the ways masters of the form have helped to extend the novel. A grasp of this theory prevents the novelist, at the beginning of her “long

apprenticeship,” (Fuentes 1995, p. 167) from taking backward steps, so that she does not feel that she is the first person who has ever attempted to write a novel, so that she can absorb Girard’s theory and push forward into the new possibilities of the novel as an art form. The novel is omnivorous. It has the capacity to devour all aspects of history and culture that come in its path and to incorporate those aspects. In doing so, the novel can be, on a single page, symphony and theatre and scented garden.

The chapters of this exegesis have investigated whether we can apply Girard’s theory of *triangular desire* to a case study, Salter’s novel *A Sport and a Pastime*. In the process of this investigation, this exegesis has shown how Girard’s theory informs our understanding of the work of one contemporary novelist, a writer, as I have established, whose work is included in the *Western Canon* and which has been published by the Modern Library and Penguin Modern Classics²⁴.

Chapter One

The first chapter of this exegesis defined Girard’s theory of *triangular desire*. It also defined the three figures—*subject*, *mediator* and *object*—of that triangle. Through understanding a definition of Girard’s triangular model, we are able to understand a wide-range of character-development throughout the history of the novel, from *Don Quixote* and *Disgrace*, to *A Fraction of the Whole* and *The Landscape of Desire*.

Chapter Two

The second chapter examined the role of the *subject* in Girard’s theory. It also observes the role of the *subject* in Salter’s novel. That chapter showed us that Salter’s

²⁴ Please refer to the introduction.

novelistic choices of narrator/*subject* not only employ many major elements of Girard's theory but that it also extends the possibilities of that theory by taking the role of the *subject* in a new direction.

Chapter Three

This chapter examined what I believe is the most crucial aspect of Girard's theory: the role of the *mediator*.²⁵ This chapter established that it is through Salter's revelation of this *mediator* and in his relationship with the *subject* that the novelist extends the model of Girard's theory. As Dowie notes in *James Salter*, the novelist places his characters in a peculiar position among one another (Dowie 1998, p. 59). This *peculiar positioning* allows us to observe Girard's theory in new ways. Applying Girard's theory to *A Sport and a Pastime* shows that theory can be flexible and applied to many more models than those that Girard unveils in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* and creates further possibilities for the investigation of his theory in the field of literary studies.

Chapter Four

This chapter investigates the candidate's creative project, a novel titled *The Landscape of Desire*, to see whether we can apply Girard's theory to that novel. It showed that, while Girard's traditional model of three figures in *triangular desire*—*subject*, *mediator* and *object*—do not always apply, other forms of *triangular desire*

²⁵ The "most crucial," I say, because Girard breaks the novel into two categories: *romantic* or *novelistic*. He uses the term *romantic* to describe "those works which reflect the presence of a mediator without ever revealing it and the term *novelistic* for the works which reveal this presence. It is to the latter," he writes, "that [*Deceit, Desire and the Novel*] is primarily devoted" (1965, p.17). It is the revelation of this *mediator* that remains central to Girard's theory. This exegesis has, therefore, focused on the *novelistic novel*.

do occur. This is, primarily, the presence of not one but two *subjects* and a single *object*. *The Landscape of Desire*'s revelation of this presence shows that Girard's theory can encompass much more than its basic formula: a triangle that reveals the presence of one *subject*, one *mediator* and one *object*. In doing so, *The Landscape of Desire*—and here it is similar to the way we can observe Girard's theory in *A Sport and a Pastime*—extends the theory of *triangular desire*. As with the examination of Salter's novel, our observation of Girard's theory and what occurs in the *triangle of desire* in *The Landscape of Desire* provides the field of literary studies with future implications of study.

Concluding the Conclusion

On the whole, this exegesis has showed how Girard's theory allows us to view Salter's novel and a wide range of literature in a new light. The exegesis has shown how a grasp of Girard's theory also helps us to understand the relationships and character-development in scenes from films such as *Blow-Up* and *Fur*.²⁶ While this exegesis has focused primarily on literature, and specifically on the *novelistic novel*, these examples from cinema show that the reach of Girard's theory extends beyond the field of literary studies. This provides further possibilities for research into Girard's theory of *triangular desire*. This theory could be further explored in not only literary studies but in film studies, as well. This shows, ultimately that Girard's theory of *triangular desire* can help us understand various relationships in varied fields of study.

This exegesis has also examined certain aspects of the history of the novel that apply, specifically, to the *novelistic novel* and how we can observe Girard's theory of

²⁶ *Blow-Up* is mentioned in chapter two; *Fur* is mentioned in chapter three.

triangular desire in that type of novel. Aside from *A Sport and a Pastime*, it has provided examples from *Don Quixote* and *Moby-Dick*, *Disgrace* and *The Landscape of Desire*. In doing so, it has established similarities in the novel and what connects novels from one age to those in another age. These connections provide readers and writers with an important understanding of character development in the novel and the ways in which characters relate to and position themselves around one another. These relations and positionings are, of course, nothing less than *triangular desire*. And it is through an understanding of *triangular desire* that “one can rediscover everything” about the art of the novel (Girard 1965, p. 57).

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